



Reinvigorating Country as teacher in Australian schooling: beginning with school teacher's direct experiences, 'relating with Country'

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Abstract

The Country as Teacher research project was a formative exploration of how Indigenous pedagogies might be taken-up as part of mainstream schooling for all Australian students. This paper reports on the first phase where participant teachers were guided and supported, through professional learning, to initiate their own 'relating with Country' practice. A Country as teacher pedagogy is enacted through cultivating the practice of reciprocal 'relating with Country', resulting in gratitude and learning about, from and how to care for the places we live. Enacting Country as Teacher in school-based curriculum operates as a 'critical pedagogy of place', contesting Eurocentric epistemic power in Australian curriculum, to provide a balanced 'both ways' education for all. We argue that for teachers to be able to appropriately facilitate Country as teacher pedagogies with students, they must first cultivate their own practice of 'relating with Country'. In this paper, we examine the stories of 26 teachers in Canberra public schools as they develop their practice of relating with Country. These stories highlight the process, and participant's challenges and successes. This paper contributes to foundational knowledge and experience for the uptake of Country as teacher pedagogies in Australian schools. Our emerging findings suggest that the practice of 'relating with Country' is within the reach of all teachers.

Keywords Country as teacher · Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing · Relating with Country · Australian curriculum

'If we share the stories of our country with gudja (whitefella), then they will have our country in their hearts as we do, and they will understand and love it, and never damage it.' David Banggal Mowaljarlai

Introduction

When the British arrived, not quite two hundred and fifty years ago, on the shores of what is now called 'Australia', they brought with them a knowledge system and approach to learning very different to those of Aboriginal peoples of the previous tens of thousands of years. Across millennia Aboriginal peoples incorporated practical and spiritual knowledge of their unique environments into 'complex cosmological, religious and (cross-species) kinship systems' (Massey,

2017, p. 20), resulting in sophisticated and sustainable 'management' of Country¹ (Rose, 2011). This 'management' of Country, which includes humans and our Earthkin,² occurs through daily cultural practices of 'emergent co-becoming' with Country (Bawaka Country et al., 2016, p. 456), constituting at the same time both practical and spiritual enactments of reciprocity. In this way, Aboriginal knowledge systems recognise Country as animate, lively and requiring relational reciprocity through knowledge sharing, gratitude and care (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; McKnight, 2016). Following Hughes and Barlo (2021), we call this practice of entering relational reciprocity with Country, 'relating with Country.'

¹ Country is a landscape 'large enough to support a group of people and small enough to be intimately known in every detail' (Rose, 2011, p. 17). It incorporates everything within, upon, and above the ground, including rocks, plants, waterways and other geographical features, animals, fire, weather, seasons and the cosmos, our Earthkin.

² To designate non-human beings in Country some authors use 'other-than-human' or 'more-than-human'. Following Plumwood (2003) who used the term 'Earth-others' our preference is Earthkin, better representing our 'oneness' and connectedness.

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Such practices were (and still are in some places) passed from generation to generation through teaching and learning systems and approaches, that grow out, over time, from each child's story. In their foundational discussion piece, *Trees Are Family Too*, Palyku academic, Jill Milroy with her mother, Elder Gladys Milroy refer to this as the 'right story'—the birthright of all Aboriginal children, the story that connects them to their place in ever-deepening ways (Milroy & Milroy, 2008). Indeed, they propose that it must become the birthright of all children born in Australia, as we all come from and are thus connected to the Earth, our Mother (Milroy & Milroy, 2008; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). Our Old People agree with this assertion. Our grandfather points out, 'the Lore teaches us that all people who live on this land, have a responsibility to love and care for this land, regardless of where they were born. The first step in doing this is to connect with the land' (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022, p. 23).

Here, for tens of thousands of years, Country has been acknowledged as primary knowledge-holder and teacher (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; McKnight, 2016; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). Largely facilitated by grandparents, children began learning their story from birth through listening to stories, and through being still and looking, and listening in Country, broadening and deepening as they grew, burgeoning into an intricate lived knowing of cross-species connections and obligations by young adulthood (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022). Again, from our grandfather Damu Paul Gordon,

And when you listen to the Old People, they will tell you, 'Don't just listen to humans, listen to them old animal ancestors too. Listen to the kangaroos, listen to the emus, listen to the birds, listen to the witchetty grubs (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022, p. 32)

These relating with Country practices enable the 'whole story or body of knowledge' to be 'observed, felt and understood on a spiritual level of connectedness' (McKnight, 2016, p. 12). This Country-centric or eco-centric way of teaching and learning worked to maintain social and ecological wellness and balance for millennia (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014, 2022).

Massey (2017) has traced the historical development of the colonisers' knowledge systems from its beginnings during the Agricultural revolution some ten thousand years ago. Over time, through processes of domestication, plants and animals became 'manipulable property' rather than the sacred beings of the previous hundred thousand years of human existence. Dramatic population increases led to invasions of neighbour's lands, the development of large-scale social and political systems and the urban revolution. These along with the Renaissance, the Reformation and the impact of Judeo-Christianity in the 'West' all contributed to

the emergence of anthropocentrism, a human-centric view of and approach to life, where the natural world becomes relegated to the category of resources and commodities (Massey, 2017). McKnight (2015) points out, inherent here is an oversimplistic culture/nature binary that confers hierarchical power relations and disconnection, rather than the relational reciprocity and 'oneness' of a Country-centric perspective. It works to 'manoeuvre Mother Earth (Country) as subordinate to Western, male culture, logic and reasoning' (McKnight, 2015, p. 278). In significant ways the industrial revolution represented a culmination of this anthropocentric ideology. For Australia, these historical developments led to the appearance on our shores in 1788 of the 'Eurocentric, rational, mechanical mind', driven by an 'emerging capitalist impulse' (Massey, 2017, p. 33).

Previously, extending upon the work and writing of MacKay (2018) and Lingard (2016), we have critiqued Australia schooling as working to reify 'unaware anthropocentrism, rampant individualism and unfettered capitalism' (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020, p. 31). Here, we portray societal discourses and practices that are out of balance, rather than being inherently wrong. We (the authors) are all products of a society built upon these ideological foundations. We are grateful for the many benefits of these ways of knowing, being and doing, but are equally cognisant of the social and ecological, collateral damage wrought through these imbalances. The work presented in this paper is an enactment of our cultural obligations, to contribute towards a rebalancing of these perspectives, and ways of living within Australian societies, through the transformation of approaches to schooling.

In Australia, there is an emerging body of valuable education research, undertaken by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and educators, working to rebalance our education systems to more equitably cater for and enable Indigenous students, their cultural perspectives and knowledges, strengths and aspirations and to build the cultural capability and responsiveness of all students, schools and universities in Australia. These papers and chapters identify and variously discuss 'learning from Country' (Burgess et al., 2022; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019; Lowe et al., 2020), Country-centred teaching (Burgess et al., 2022) culturally responsive pedagogies (Morrison et al., 2019; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019) or more generally the centrality of Country to Indigenous cultures (Bishop, 2020). All of these focus on a 'social justice imperative' (McKnight, 2016, p. 12), that is, human-centred outcomes, such as enhancing Indigenous student's sense of belonging and engagement in schooling (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019; Lowe et al., 2020; Morrison et al., 2019), and the conscientization that occurs through learning about Aboriginal histories and stories, including stories about Country, and 'truth-telling' (Burgess et al., 2022).

We acknowledge this as critically important work towards a more socially just, culturally inclusive society, and express our gratitude to the authors for their efforts. Along with others (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; McKnight, 2016; Milroy & Milroy, 2008), our learning and cultural obligations as Indigenous cultural men (first two authors) require us to focus on the ‘priority’ of ‘a pedagogy of respectful, reciprocal relationships with Country’ (McKnight, 2016, p. 12) for all students (Milroy & Milroy, 2008). As McKnight (2016) points out approaches that focus on a social justice imperative and Country as teacher pedagogies are not mutually exclusive. However, we see our work and research more closely aligning with and enriching, place-based education approaches and pedagogies in education, with their focus on young people learning how to care for the ‘ecological and social wellbeing of the communities they inhabit’ (McInerney et al., 2011, p. 5). Further, as these pedagogies work to challenge and disrupt Eurocentric epistemic power, with its focus on rationalism, atomisation and anthropocentrism (McKnight, 2016; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020), Country as teacher operates as a ‘critical pedagogy of place’, a much-needed approach in contemporary schooling (McInerney et al., 2011; Gruenewald, 2003).

The Country as Teacher project (CaT) explored an approach to professional learning, pedagogies and curriculum design that supports teachers and students to cultivate practices of relating with Country, so they come to understand, love and know how to care for their place. Conducted through the Centre for Sustainable Communities (CSC) at the University of Canberra (UC), the project was funded by the Affiliated Schools Research Program, a formalised research/practice partnership between the Australian Capital Territory, Education Directorate (ACT ED) and the Faculty of Education at UC. The research was led by the two primary authors Spillman and Wilson, both Indigenous educators, scholars and cultural men in the Lore of Karulkiyalu Country, for which Damu Paul Gordon is the primary custodian. As previously mentioned, along with McKnight (2016) speaking of Yuin Country and Bawaka Country et al. (2016), the primary purpose of Karulkiyalu Lore is to develop respectful, reciprocal relationships with Country and Earthkin for ecological balance and the wellness of all beings. In speaking of such similarities our old people say ‘Same but different’—same Lore, different Country, different stories. Nixon and McKinnon are also investigators on the CaT research project and co-authors. Both are of settler backgrounds in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand respectively. Ethics permissions for this work were sought and granted by both the UC and the ACT ED.

Due to our focus on Country-centric curriculum and pedagogies for all teachers and children in all schools across Australia, it is unrealistic to expect this work to be entirely led by local Indigenous Elders. The formative work for this

pilot CaT project was discussed with a number of Ngunnawal Elders and knowledge-holders prior to commencement. In particular, the Ngunnawal Elder in Residence at UC was consulted and approval conferred. Chief investigators regularly informally report project progress and experiences. All participant teachers and school were encouraged to access Ngunnawal and other Aboriginal people to assist with knowledge and practice as curriculum and pedagogy unfolded. Though this work was interrupted with Covid lockdowns, teachers in two of the four schools did this, with some of the work being remunerated and some offered free of charge. In the next phase of this research, which will involve whole-of-school approaches, Ngunnawal knowledge-holders will be centrally involved from the outset.

In this paper, we explore our initial findings from the first phases of the pilot project during which the research team worked with a cohort of twenty-six teachers in the ACT from Early Childhood through to Senior Secondary. This first phase focused on participant teachers cultivating their own practice of relating with Country. Our own (primary authors) experiences of learning from our Old People reinforce the belief that only when teachers have direct experiences relating with Country, will they be able to create and facilitate authentic experiences for their students. The work with curricula and pedagogies was phase 2 of the pilot and will be reported in a publication to follow. Our emerging findings demonstrate the transformative nature of participant teacher’s direct experiences with Country, and that everyone has the potential to relate with Country through cultivating the practice of being still, looking and listening.

An Indigenous pedagogical standpoint: Country as teacher as a critical pedagogy of place

Critical pedagogy is built upon the belief that schools are inherently politically contested spaces (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). That is, goals of schooling, curriculum and pedagogical processes are shaped by the society in which the school exists, and therefore are subject to and result from socio-political power dynamics (Freire, 1970). Many authors, including Fogarty et al. (2017), Karilkiyalu Country et al. (2020), and Lingard et al. (2013) have noted an increasingly narrow focus in the dominant Australian education system regarding what is considered ‘important’ teaching and learning, with literacy and numeracy becoming the all-consuming foci of Australian educational policy makers as they struggle with ways to keep Australian students internationally competitive (Fogarty et al., 2017; Spillman, 2017). In contrast, researchers such as Gruenewald (2003) and McInerney et al. (2011) have argued for many years that combining critical pedagogy with place-based education to

form a ‘critical pedagogy of place’ must become central to all education systems. This is to ensure that students develop a critical socio-political awareness of, and sense of responsibility and obligation to the places they inhabit. Apple (2011, 2013) argues that this will enhance the likelihood that schools play a central role in meeting contemporary and future social and ecological challenges that neoliberal, capitalist education approaches tend to ignore or deflate.

Central to Indigenous Standpoint Theory (Nakata, 2001) is the capacity for Indigenous researchers to critique colonisation and its impacts on Indigenous societies, cultures and knowledge systems from within the academy which has historically been part of the colonial machinery. From an Australian Indigenous standpoint, therefore, current pedagogical approaches in Australian education can be seen as problematic. If ‘pedagogy’ refers to the ways teachers construct learning experiences, Indigenous pedagogies (along with our ontologies and epistemologies) have long been marginalised. Whilst the reasons behind this marginalisation are important to understand and consider, it is arguably more important to simply understand that the legacy of this historical disregard is that teachers working within the current education system in Australia may not even realise that Indigenous pedagogies could present an invaluable and transformative approach (Wilson, 2022). This is particularly the case in urban environments (such as the ACT) which may be (perceived to be) disconnected from the cultural learning experiences one might more readily find, or expect to find in more rural and remote areas.

Country as Teacher argues for the centrality of Country-centric learning in Australian schools with its focus on (reciprocal) relating with Country practices for social and ecological balance and wellness. In speaking back to the existing socio-political influences that work to reify Eurocentric epistemic power through curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Lowe et al., 2021), Country as teacher pedagogy operates as a ‘critical pedagogy of place’. In so doing, it clearly links to place-based education, but primarily asks educators to adopt an entirely new ontological paradigm in their teaching—focusing on how mainstream (Eurocentric) educative approaches can fit inside an Indigenous knowledge system, rather than using Indigenous knowledge to enrich and further the ends of mainstream education.

Relating with Country through a Country as teacher pedagogy

Science ‘discovered’ a hundred or so years ago, what our Old People have known for tens of thousands of years, that at a physical level we are all composed of Earth and water through the food and fluids we consume (Suzuki, 1997). We all come from the Earth, our Mother—We are all

Country—literally (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). Yet Indigenous Australians know this connection is far more than physical. We are also ‘One’ with Country through feelings, intuition, instinct and spirit (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; McKnight, 2016; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). We have previously offered the Googar (goanna) story, which highlights the critical importance of balance between all these different ways of knowing, being and doing (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). We offered this story in the body of Googar to honour Karulkiyalu Country, but as our Old People say ‘same but different’. This story was used as a teaching and learning framework all across Eastern Australia. For example, it is carved into the body of a bush turkey, on a rock platform in the Wollombi area of the Newcastle hinterland—same Lore, same purpose, different place and story (Jones, 2009).

Cultivating a practice of relating with Country begins with acceptance of our innate connections with Country. The realisation that everything we are and have comes from Country seeds gratitude and a desire to invest time and effort cultivating a reciprocal relationship with Country. This practice is undertaken through simply being still, looking and listening for extended periods of time. This simple process exemplifies Damu Paul Gordon 6Ls which he has offered as a re-interpretation of an old pedagogical process for Country as teacher (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014). The 6Ls is a sequential process of lore, love, look, listen, learn, lead, with the first five acting in a cyclical fashion over and over, before ‘lead’ can be enacted. *Lore* includes all the stories for Country—about places and how they were created, particular species, lifecycles, seasons, fire, all Earthkin in Country. The Jumbal story offered in Karulkiyalu Country et al. (2020) about how we are all made of earth and water, as discussed above, is *lore*. Knowing and accepting this story provokes a ‘feeling’ response which is *love* in the 6Ls. It might be curiosity or gratitude, perhaps even love itself. This affective response motivates us to go into Country and *look* and *listen* to *learn* more about the Earthkin of focus. What we *learn* deepens our knowledge of the *lore*, and the cycle begins again. Eventually when we have repeated the cycle many times, we will be able and more motivated to *lead* others by facilitating the process for them. Through pedagogies like the 6Ls, we can cultivate a practice of relating with Country, to enact Country as teacher.

Existing studies have demonstrated that for adults to cultivate a practice of relating with Country, often requires effort to unlearn ingrained habits of rational-analytical thinking both with university academics (McKnight, 2016) and graduate students (Harmin et al., 2017). In both studies, participants initially experienced degrees of confusion and uncertainty, a phenomenon Hughes and Barlo (2021) discuss when beginning a relating with Country practice:

I don't think we can just go "ready, set, listen!" and expect to immediately be able to listen in a whole-body way if we've formed deep habits of busyness and not paying attention, or constantly talking to ourselves in our own heads, (p. 359)

With extended time in Country, each of the studies also reported moments of break-through, in which participants became able to better listen to and learn from Country. Our work engaged in a similar exploration focusing on teacher participant's experiences attempting to cultivate their own relating with Country practices, and then planning and facilitating such Country-centric learning for their students. This paper explores participant teacher's experiences through this endeavour.

Professional learning and research methodologies

Initially two-hour, whole-staff professional learning workshops were conducted in the four participating schools, in either late 2020 or early in 2021. Teachers were involved in setting up some cultural protocols—acknowledging Country, where they expressed gratitude to Country, Earthkin and human custodians, and yarning circles through a one-on-one check-in process, and several small group conversations about the ways they incorporate Indigenous perspectives and their perceptions and feelings about this. Yarning circles enable an equitable, cooperative and collaborative conversational space, requiring participants to listen attentively, establishing a respectful, relational space of non-judgement (Hughes & Barlo, 2021; McKnight, 2016; Walker et al., 2014). This enables people to find their voice and share their story. We introduced our critique of contemporary schooling (see Karuulkiyalu Country et al., 2020), using the Goo-gar story to exemplify the out-of-balance prioritisation of rational-analytical ways of knowing, and the lack of direct, outdoor learning experiences for students. Teachers were then introduced to Country as teacher pedagogies that have been the mainstay of teaching and learning in Australia for tens of thousands of years. Finally, the various phases of the Country as teacher research project were outlined with participant teacher milestones and obligations highlighted. From this, twenty-six teachers from the four schools volunteered to participate over the following two years.

These teachers then participated in a further two-hour workshop early in 2021, in either a primary (two schools) or secondary (two schools) cohort. Following the protocols of Acknowledging Country and a yarning circle check-in, we discussed Country as teacher pedagogies in further detail, and how to initiate and cultivate the associated personal practice of relating with Country, using

the 6Ls as an exemplar. Potential opportunities and challenges were highlighted and discussed. Teachers began their weekly practice over the ensuing weeks, keeping a record of experiences and reflections (e.g. journal, audio-text, drawings etc.). Teachers were supported with regular check-ins within school-based cohorts, email and mobile phone contact with the chief investigators and research assistant.

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

Two project researchers independently coded the transcripts. These codings along with teacher's collective sense-making were considered and discussed by the research team, before finally agreeing on the main emerging themes discussed below: engaging with and moving through challenges; initiating transitions into different ways of knowing, being and doing; repetition in place, and the overarching theme of, teachers readiness to relate with Country—opening up to diverse ways of knowing, being and doing.

Emerging findings

Teacher readiness to relate with Country—opening up to diverse ways of knowing, being and doing

Participant's experiences initiating relating with Country practice, yielded rich descriptions of the sensory experience of relating to Country and learning from Country. Rachel, for example, offered the following description:

I recently went up onto Mt Painter and there were so many butterflies. So many different colours, white and blue and yellow. Flowers must have just bloomed and I just kind of entered into it. I'm just sticking in such a small moment, and just seeing life pass by, and I know some butterflies live for just twenty-four hours. And this warbling magpie, and then this lizard that crawled out onto a rock, and I was just wondering what next. Oh another magpie. Just wondering, watching it. They are special because it's a moment just for you, and you try to describe that to other people. But there's so much you can't describe. (Rachel, primary school teacher)

Most participants expressed similar feelings that there was 'so much you can't describe', yet surprised the research team with their readiness to notice and engage, and their efforts to overcome the inadequacies of language to capture their experiences. Participants spoke about the 'gurgling of the creek', 'humming of insects', that 'rich autumn smell', 'chirping of birds', the 'riot of the frogs' with their 'whole lifeforce dedicated to singing', the 'pressure and silence' just before a huge thunderstorm. Most participants recalled a visceral response to their experience, variously as 'awe, wonder, beauty, amazing feeling, inspiring, enjoyment, and eliciting curiosity'. Another described receiving the *gift* of feeling 'palpably held by the earth'.

These expressions reflect a range of ways of receiving from Country, encompassing ways of knowing, being and doing that are empathetic, kinetic, intuitive, sensory and, at times access intergenerational knowledges of the past, as outlined in the Googarv story.

Engaging with and moving through challenges

In talking about experiences of initiating their relating with Country practice, participants identified a number of challenges that they needed to move beyond in order to relate with Country. Echoing findings from previous studies (Harmin et al., 2017; McKnight, 2016) about the necessity of unlearning, the participants in this study grappled to reframe their challenges.

Beginning the practice of relating with Country was difficult, to varying extents and in different ways, for most participants. Several participants searched for the *right place*, and struggled to find it. As Gabriella put it:

I found it really hard to find a place, because I guess, to find the right place I didn't want to hear cars. I didn't want to be around the buildings. So I found it really hard to find a place where I felt like I could connect to Country. (Gabriella, primary school teacher)

Whilst minimising distractions when beginning practice is ideal, Callaghan and Gordon (2014) reminds us that all Country is sacred, with lore, Earth-kin and ancestral spirits. It was difficult, however, for participants to step outside a familiar understanding of *nature* as a place separate from the urban. Through their collective sense-making, two of the groups identified tensions between nature (Country) and urban spaces as a significant theme in their learning. Participants in one of the secondary school groups spoke about how disconnected people in Canberra are from Country. The conversation arose as three teachers, who had previously lived on remote Aboriginal communities in the *top end* of the Northern Territory, made comparisons between those locations and Canberra. One of these teachers, Craig, related that this *urban disconnection* is illustrated in the way Canberra relates to rain—as it falls on compacted, cut-away land in housing developments the concern is to direct it swiftly into stormwater drains, whereas in the NT rain brings with it cultural, ceremonial and seasonal significance and consequences. It is a poignant point, and speaks to an expectation that the work of relating with Country is best done far away from urban settings. This project, however, seeks to reconnect as many Australian students as possible to the Country they inhabit, so they come to know and love it. Thus, it is important to find ways to do this in regional and urban settings (especially as it is Country in these most heavily populated areas that most needs our reconnection, love and attention). The other participants who were able to reflect on their experiences in remote NT communities described enjoyable, relaxing experiences on Country in Canberra, where they felt a sense of connection and peace. Indeed, many participants created significant connections with specific places in the Canberra area in relatively short periods of time, demonstrating that the perception of nature (Country)/urban binary was not a barrier to all. As Will, a primary school teacher noted:

But there's of course no escaping the fact that right now our Country is urbanised. And so that's part of it too. So trying not to be judgmental about that trying to acknowledge Okay, that's in the background, but we still got this beautiful area here that is not pristine, but it's an area of natural beauty.

Finding a place that felt good, and letting go of expectations about what *Country* ought to look like, enabled many participants to move beyond the challenge of finding the *right place*.

The next issue for many was finding the time to spend one hour each week on Country, particularly for those with young families. Two of the four participant groups identified the difficulty of finding time as a dominant theme or pattern through their collective sense making conversations. Some participants identified feelings of guilt or

anxiety about asking for this time away from family obligations, largely due to the fact they had volunteered to participate (as opposed to having been required to attend). Four participants were unable to allocate regular time each week, but nevertheless made at least one or a few sporadic attempts. The majority managed to engage with the challenge of time in a variety of ways, often identifying the personal benefits of doing so:

Because it's just giving yourself the space. And I guess sometimes as a parent and all the jobs that we have we don't allow ourselves that space to just be and do something that is beneficial to us. And my family were amazing because they knew that during that time they couldn't come and annoy me. Yeah, so it was really, really beneficial. I'll just keep doing it as a practice, because it's been really helpful. (Isabella, primary school teacher)

As Isabella identifies, what was needed to get past the feeling that it was not possible to find the time was to give herself permission, to 'allow' herself 'that space to just be'. Connected to the challenge of finding time, was the challenge of momentarily *parking* the habit of being organised or task-focused. As Julie recognized, it was not easy to leave this thinking pattern behind: 'The main thing is I'm gonna go without a task, without a purpose, just like literally go. But I was confused. What am I supposed to do? We are very task oriented' (Julie, secondary school teacher). Several participants also talked about their emerging awareness of the limitations of this task and organisation orientation and value in setting it aside for a while two participants talked about a concrete process of peeling off these layers of thinking in preparation for time on Country.

So much in life I just value being more organised... I think when you go out on Country those expectations just leave... You're in a space where that clutter has gone and you're free just to be. I really enjoy that, being able to be in the moment and look and notice. It's very refreshing. (Abigail, primary school teacher)

For many participants, it took a lot of effort to put aside the habitual orientation to a task, and to create a space where, as Abigail puts it, *the clutter has gone*. Some spoke about this as the difficulty of 'getting out of their head' when coming onto Country. Sophie put it this way when discussing the difficulty she had in connecting.

It's because of the 'getting out of my head' thing. I find that so difficult, because ... the harder you try, the more thoughts come in, and I'm like, *No, just stop!* So yeah, I've been working on training myself out of [it]. (Sophie, secondary school teacher)

As necessary as organisational and task focused habits are in contemporary society, relating with Country requires a capacity to be in the present moment. Hughes and Barlo (2021) write that learning to do this is like 'learning to use a new muscle' (p. 357). Some participants exercised the 'new muscle' by redirecting the stream of thinking in ways that helped them to focus more outwardly. Abigail, for example, spoke about how sitting and trying actively to listen to Country meant that:

I stopped thinking about myself. I started thinking more about nature and how things were working. So I kind of stopped thinking about you know what's going on in my life and thinking about where I was, about the place. (Abigail, primary school teacher)

Engaging with and moving through challenges such as the ones briefly explored above is essentially about, trying to settle enough of the egoistic chatter *to be present to what's happening right now* (Hughes & Barlo, 2021 p. 359).

Transitioning into different ways of knowing, being and doing

Moving past the challenges of finding the right place, setting aside an orientation to tasks, and 'getting out of my head' required a degree of unlearning of habitual ways of knowing, being and doing, and discovering a new (old) set of skills that more readily enabled connection with Country. For many participants, there was an identifiable threshold moment, practice or realisation that marked this shift into a different way of knowing, being and doing, which enabled the possibility of relating with Country.

Letting go was one important shift. In various ways, many participants discussed the importance of *letting go* of their dominant, habitual focus on thinking, planning and being in control, as with Abigail (quoted above). Melissa, also a primary school teacher, described this letting go as a process of 'returning to my littleness', enabling connection through sensory experience. She spoke about every new session on Country increasing her ability for:

... just letting go, reprioritizing a perspective, gaining a kind of returning to my littleness but my value as well... the more I kind of see it in nature... the more I hear it, the more I notice [pause] and the more connected I feel ...

We interpret this 'returning to littleness' as indicative of a de-centering of self. This sense of *letting go*, or 'surrendering to Country' as another participant put it, enables participants to perceive life revolving around nature (which we are all part of). In a small way, it flags a critical shift from an anthropocentric orientation towards a Country-centric one. Melissa's hesitations and unfinished sentences also indicate

an experience that was difficult to put into language. All participants struggled verbalizing and/ or making sense of their reflections as indicated by the amount of pausing and shifting of body positions in the observational notes. One participant did verbalize this struggle making statements like ‘I can’t really articulate this very well’, and ‘I’m not really sure how to connect it all in just yet.’ In all the transitional experiences described below, hesitation and half-finished sentences suggest participants were struggling to find words for a very new set of experiences and perspectives.

For some participants, there was a clear threshold moment that transitioned them into a more relaxed state, one that enabled them to *breathe*:

And so I think I’ve been going out every other day now. Because at some point, something just went *Agh-hhh* [shoulders relax – exhalation] And I feel like I can just breathe for what might be forty-five minutes, or what not, that I go for And now this is my time to just go and breathe. ... and relax. (Danielle, primary school teacher, [observations added from researcher notes])

Descriptions of this kind of relaxed state were present in many participants reflections and clearly enabled both a deeper connection to place whilst also conferring a sense of wellness. Sam, a secondary school teacher, quickly developed the capacity to transition in this way by lying under the trees at school when he felt stressed or worried. He reported a feeling of being ‘palpably held by the earth’ during these interludes, describing the process as an ‘emotional balm’ and a gift.

Many others also spoke about the calming, de-stressing impact of their time on Country. Participants spoke about receiving much needed *heart stuff*, the *emotional balm* from the places they visited—calmness, relaxation, sense of smallness and connectedness. One participant recognized this as *receiving* from Country:

I think that idea of receiving. You can’t make it (by yourself). You’re open ... that we live in receiving from it (Country). That’s very different to anything else we do. (Rachel, primary teacher)

This realisation that we ‘live in receiving from [Country]’ reveals a profound shift towards a much stronger sense of relationship with Country. Whilst many participants received much needed emotional and perhaps even spiritual wellness through relating with Country, the food, water and shelter than maintains us moment-to-moment, day to day comes from Country too. Awareness of this integral relationship is core to a Country-centric perspective: our lives are possible through receiving from Country. This highlights the importance of reciprocal relating with Country, central to an Indigenous ethic—she looks after us, we must look after her.

Several participants talked about shifting perceptions of time through their experiences. One of the groups of primary school teachers collectively identified *different perceptions of time* as a key theme. In the following excerpt, Melissa tries to describe the different sense of time that emerged as a common experience in the group.

I feel like something that stood out for me, and amongst us, is how a very different sense of time occurs once you head out into Country, and away from everything else. It kind of becomes bigger and everything else becomes smaller. And not only that, but that you know, the small amount that we might be sitting in or exploring...[pauses] becomes massive in that form .. out in detail, and um beauty and wonder. Yeah, some things that stood out from my understandings and sense of awe returning to the beauty. (Melissa, primary school teacher)

The *it* that becomes bigger for Melissa is Country, expanding in ‘detail’, ‘beauty and wonder’—a transformation that takes place in just a ‘small amount’ of time.

A shifting sense of time was also associate with a sense of wonder as the present moment seemed to expand to encompass the history of a place. Kevin for example, a senior secondary teacher, shared how repeatedly returning to a place, being present, looking and listening provided increasing information about the history of that place. He proposed, ‘actually being present in the moment, really is about understanding the past, because the moment is a representation (of the past)’. He used the example of a log jam at one place on the Murrumbidgee River to exemplify this, describing how he began to notice it told stories of past floods, trees burnt in the 2003 fires, and various states of decomposition of different trees. He spoke about how the past is evident (in) the present, with past and present bleeding into each other. Along with repeated cycles of flood and fire, he also mentioned shooting of new plants in the decomposed fibres, implying the future. Kevin’s experiences and revelations are consistent with Indigenous practices of learning from Country in which the more a person experiences a place the deeper their relating with Country becomes. It is also consistent with an Indigenous view of time and Country where past and future collapse into the place-present. The ancestral creations of Country in *the dreaming* are not mythical stories and acts of the past. They are also happening now (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014). Country, including all Earth-kin and humans, is emergently co-becoming, being re-created, in every moment through reciprocal relating (Bawaka Country et al., 2016). This is why it is critical, for example, for Indigenous people to continue singing and dancing up Country and Earth-kin, and our own stories through ceremonial and cultural practices such as corroboree, food gathering, meditation and burning.

Repetition in place

Like Kevin, several participants provided reflections that offer evidence for the ways repeated sessions in the same place enable deeper relating with Country. Two participants commented on how they noticed more about the place each time they went. This caused a little surprise for both, one reflecting, ‘I’m like, how did I not see this the last time I was here?’ A number of other participants talked about their deepening sense of connection to a place or particular Earth-kin with repeated visits. After four visits, Harry, a secondary school teacher put it this way, referring to the impending housing development in the area and becoming quite emotional as he spoke.

I actually like kind of got a real love for this tree. So I think if they want to remove that (tree), I am gonna be chained around it. I didn’t say that comment at all haha. I just got a real connection to this tree now. (Harry, secondary school teacher).

Another two participants talked in depth about their repeated visits to particular places that they began frequenting prior to enrolling in this research project. Rebecca, a secondary school teacher, outlined her curiosity about and connection with ants, more specifically a particular ant mound near the staff car park. Despite her perception that members of her faculty ‘think I’m an idiot’, she has sat with and photographed this ant mound over a period of days and months. ‘I have become really addicted’ she said, to noticing what the ants are doing and connecting that with what is going on in the environment and in her body. ‘I have learnt a lot. They are extremely busy and incredibly connected to each other’, she reported, pointing out how in tune they are with their environment. Rebecca went onto describe how the ants ‘thicken up their nests with black stones before cold weather’ to hold thermal heat, replacing them with white reflective stones coming into spring and summer. Her excitement about and interest in the ants was clear in her animated delivery. Finally, she said almost apologetically, with an exhalation and downward gaze, ‘Yeah I’m a bit addicted to ants’. This is a powerful example of a schoolteacher, who is responsible for designing learning experiences for students, taking her own learning from Country seriously. She had entered the *tail* of Googar, beginning to gain ancestral knowledge that holds strong messages for how we need to live—intergenerational, ancestral wisdom. She has received from the ants and has become grateful, committed to and knowledgeable about how to care for them.

Kevin, a senior secondary male teacher, identified a place on the Murrumbidgee River he had been regularly visiting for some time. He pointed out one thing he had learnt is that when we ‘rush through’ a place we ‘miss the deeper stuff, and so by repeatedly going you see the connections’. This

young man indicated he could tell us a lot about the various species that inhabit this place and about their interactions and connections. Accumulating this knowledge has taken him ‘a lot of time (of) careful observations and experience’. The contrast he made between this way of learning and our current approach to curriculum was poignant: ‘We have a lot of pressure to rush through curriculum, this bit, then this bit ... this bit. But then we’re told we’re meant to be focusing on critical thinking skills and stuff’ (Kevin, secondary school teacher). From an Indigenous perspective, Kevin was beginning to access the lore for this place, the various stories belonging to different Earth-kin and how they are related to each other. With guidance, though not from humans, this young man had enacted an ancient Indigenous process to engage Country as teacher.

Concluding remarks

Teaching and learning has been happening in Australia for tens of thousands of years, focusing on an array of ways for knowing, being and doing to maintain social and ecological wellness in Country (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). Country has always been the primary teacher for these processes. In this paper, we share initial findings from a project, involving 26 preschool to senior secondary teachers, designed to explore how Country as teacher might be reintroduced to Australian education systems.

As with other researchers (Harmin et al., 2017; McKnight, 2016), we found that for many participants there was a threshold or breakthrough moment or experience. Many participants struggled to articulate what they had experienced, such was the unfamiliarity and dissonance it created. With increasing practice, this uncertainty settled for most participants, reflecting a greater capacity to move between familiar ways of knowing, being and doing and an emerging capacity to relate with and listen to Country. Like McKnight (2016) and Harmin et al. (2017), this project is further demonstrating that a critical aspect of relating with Country as teacher often involves a degree of unlearning and (re)learning. Our research is thus contributing to a growing scholarship committed to moving towards a more eco-centric or Country-centric approach.

Above all, what our emerging findings suggest is that *relating with Country* is within the reach of all teachers. In contrast to the anxiety that many non-Indigenous teachers feel when attempting to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, our work suggests that this learning is accessible regardless of Indigeneity, and is therefore potentially available to all Australian teacher and their students. The stories of our participants indicate that it was possible for all of them, to various extents, to cultivate a practice of relating with Country. Indeed, once

participants moved through the initial challenges, feelings of closeness and familiarity were common. The reflections shared by participants underline the importance of returning to the same place during their *relating with Country* practice and the growing connection they felt with each returning journey. Some spoke about an *addiction* to a particular place or Earth-kin, expressing the feeling that they *needed* to return. Given the implicit connection that all people have with the places that we inhabit (Suzuki, 1997; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020), it is not surprising that all participants demonstrated the capacity, with support, to reconnect with place. Perhaps the phenomenon that we see in the stories these participants have related back to us is simply a remembering of how to relate with Country: a capacity innate to children but long since unlearned by adults through years of anthropocentric schooling at all levels of education.

In the second phase of the project, to be reported on in a subsequent article, teachers worked to modify units of work for their students to include Country as teacher experiences. We believe that giving students these direct experiences with Country will provide impetus to reshape our society into a more ecologically sustainable one. Our efforts in bringing Country as teacher into schools, is part of a broader movement to shift the balance of education, making space for the teaching and learning systems that have sustained social and ecological communities in Australia for millennia. We believe this to be an authentically Australian, both-ways curriculum for all students. We give the final word to Damu Paul Gordon, of Karulkiyalu Country, in the hope that educators and policy makers who read this paper and take an interest in our study understand their own power and legitimacy in this space, and find the courage to explore their own relationships with Country.

In our stories, everything started from Country and our people went out throughout the world and over time their skin changed, language changed, Lore was forgotten. In 1788 some of the forgotten children came back. Now, children, you are home. You need to wake up and listen to your elders. It is time for you to learn what you have lost. (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014, p. 11)

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