



'New localism' in Australian schools: Country as Teacher as a critical pedagogy of place

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Received: 14 December 2022 / Revised: 26 April 2023 / Accepted: 2 May 2023 / Published online: 26 June 2023
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Abstract

This article reports on phase two of our school-based Country as Teacher research, focusing on teacher's learning and experiences through their efforts to enact Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy with students in ACT schools. Cultivating their own practices of reciprocal Relating with Country (Phase 1, see Spillman, Wilson, Nixon & McKinnon, 2022) prepares teachers to enact Country as Teacher with students. A yarning circle focus group and semi-structured interviews were again used to unpack teacher's reflections and learnings regarding their attempts to enact Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogies through units of work. Due to major disruptions in schooling caused by a long COVID lockdown, during Term Three 2021, participation in data collection for Phase 2 of the Country as Teacher research was on a voluntary basis. Thirteen of the original twenty-six teachers offered to participate. Despite the COVID disruptions, many teachers felt that the high levels of student engagement with Country as Teacher, expressions of wellness through these experiences, and the emergence of inquiry approaches, conferred 'permission' to continue enacting these pedagogies in their day-to-day teaching and learning, even when perceived not to be a direct enactment of the Australian Curriculum. This flagged a clear theme in the qualitative data, of teacher's growing desire to enact a 'moral imperative', to 'do it for the students'. Teacher's own experiences Relating with Country were also deemed essential to the motivation and courage necessary to enact Country as Teacher pedagogies. This formative research suggests that high levels of student engagement motivated teachers to reinterpret systemic accountabilities and imperatives. We propose that in this way, among others discussed below, Country as Teacher operated as a 'critical pedagogy of place.'

Keywords Country as Teacher · Relating with Country · Australian Curriculum · Critical pedagogy of place

Introduction

An authentically Australian version of place-based education (PBE) has been happening for tens of thousands of years through Indigenous Country¹-centric² pedagogies that focus on nurturing social and ecological balance and wellness (Callaghan & Gordon, 2022). These teaching and learning processes have continued to operate as cultural practices in several places across Australia, albeit in curtailed and modified ways, despite the impacts of colonisation

(Callaghan & Gordon, 2022; Gordon, 2021). Indigenous Australian pedagogy rests on the ancient knowledge that we all come from the Earth, from Country. Physically we, along with all Earthkin,³ are composed of earth and water, a fact reinforced through more recent scientific, biochemical evidence (Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; Suzuki, 1997).

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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' in recognition of our connectedness and obligations. Aboriginal knowledge systems recognise Country as animate, lively, and requiring relational reciprocity through knowledge sharing, gratitude, and care (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; McKnight, 2016).

² Country-centric is used here in preference to 'eco-centric' or 'bio-centric' as it better conveys an Indigenous view of life.

³ Our choice of the term Earthkin is predicated on Plumwood's (2003) use of the term 'Earth-others', along with our preference for the word 'kin' marking connectedness, rather the 'others' which implies separation.

In a Country-centric pedagogy, children grow into an ever expanding and deepening knowledge of these innate connections within a local, cross-species kinship system (Rose, 2011), connection that becomes obligations once adult status is conferred through the appropriate ceremonial rites of passage (Gordon, 2021). Gladys and Jill Milroy—Palyku mother and daughter, elder and academic respectively—refer to this knowledge as the birthright of all Aboriginal children, as their ‘right story’: the story that makes a child’s connections to Country and Earth-kin explicit, valued and the centre of their identity (Milroy & Milroy, 2008). They propose that a story of connection with Country and Earthkin must become the birthright of all children born in Australia, as these connections lie within us all.

As yet, there is little widespread understanding of the way Indigenous teaching and learning is oriented towards fostering understanding of connection in this regard, or of the potential of Indigenous pedagogies as a model of PBE for contemporary Australia. Rather, the national ‘Australian Curriculum’ works to incorporate atomised, de-contextualised pieces of Indigenous knowledge as ‘elaborations’ into a Eurocentric curriculum framework, through the Cross-Curricular Priority of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures’ (Lowe et al., 2021). It is likely this situation has occurred as modern Australian education systems took shape as part of the colonial machinery, complicit in the economic exploitation and cultural oppression of local (Indigenous) communities and the Country(s) they belonged to, underwritten by deep cultural assumptions of Anglo-European superiority (Massey, 2017; see also Pascoe, 2018). Indigenous pedagogies, knowledge systems, and cultural practices have rarely been deemed worthy of serious consideration or examination, except through the fields of ethnography and anthropology which have primarily worked to maintain their status as ‘exotic’ and/or ‘primitive’, or at best, in more contemporary times, as interesting exemplars of ‘cultural otherness’ (Sepie, 2017; Collins-Gearing & Smith, 2016). Sepie (2017), for example, provides a rigorous insight into how Indigenous ways of knowing have been discredited. Ways of knowing, being, and doing based upon human-Earthkin relationships, communication, and knowledge sharing have been accepted for millennia by Indigenous peoples across the globe as ‘real’ and true. With colonialism and the spread of ‘western culture’, these ways of knowing, being, and doing have been denigrated, assigned to the category of ‘myth’, which stands in opposition to ‘truth’ in a ‘fiction/fact’ binary, historically reified through ‘academic realms’ (pp. 5–6). Sepie (2017) points out that whilst it has taken millennia for these complex and dynamic, cross-species, cultural knowledge systems to evolve, only two generations have been required to (almost) erase them.

It is, however, testimony to the interest in, indeed the desire for, a resurgence of PBE that the paper by McInerney

et al. (2011) titled ‘*Coming to a place near you?*’ *The politics and possibilities of a critical pedagogy of place-based education* was the ‘most read’ journal article published by the Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education (2022) prior to the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. As the authors point out, PBE has become ‘a rallying point for school reformers in neoliberal times’ (p.6), a motivation that has likely been accentuated over the ensuing decade, as the neoliberal ‘logic of measurement, competition and control’ has continued to seriously impact both schooling and teacher education (Biesta et al., 2020, p. 455). McInerney et al. (2011) suggest that the primary justification for PBE in schools focuses on ‘the importance of creating opportunities for young people to learn about and care for ecological and social wellbeing of the communities they inhabit’ (p.5). Following Gruenewald (2003, see also Gruenewald & Smith, 2007) and due to a lack of socio-political critique in PBE, McInerney et al. argue for the combination of PBE and critical pedagogy, to form a critical pedagogy of place-based education. They identify that the ‘new localism’ proposed by Gruenewald and Smith (2007) has:

a much stronger political flavour (than PBE) insofar as it seeks to make more explicit the connections between global capitalism and the devastating impact of economic exploitation and cultural oppression on local communities. (McInerney et al, 2011, p.5)

The authors point out that whilst there are ‘numerous case studies’ focused on the benefits of PBE in America, ‘much less has been written about the benefits of PBE in Australia’ (p. 7). We suggest, however, that PBE ought to be understood as ‘old localism’ in the Australian context, as connection to and care for place is a central pedagogical practice of Indigenous teaching and learning.

There are indications that the academy in Australia is shifting to create space for PBE and engagement with ‘localism’. At the same time the national ‘Australian Curriculum’ is under increasing critique regarding inadequacies in its intentions and approach to Indigenous knowledges (Lowe & Galstruan, 2020; Lowe et al, 2021). More academics, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are writing about Country-centric ways of knowing, being, and doing and their associated ‘Country as Teacher’ pedagogies and, in so doing, are offering glimpses of an authentically Australian version of the ‘new localism’ that McInerney et al. (2011) exalt and seek. The Bawaka Country collective (Bawaka Country et al., 2014, 2016) has written extensively about cross-species communication and knowledge sharing from a Yolngu perspective. McKnight (2015, 2016) has offered academics from a school of education in a regional university a cultural experience, Mingadhuga Mingayung, in Yuin Country, that worked to challenge and disrupt the disconnection of ‘western binary thinking’, opening them to a renewed, embodied relationship with Country. This work

aimed for knowledge to be ‘observed, felt and understood on a spiritual level of connectedness’ (McKnight, 2016, p. 12). As mentioned above, Gladys and Jill Milroy have proposed a re-focusing on the ‘right story’ for all Australian children, the one that connects them physically, emotionally, intuitively and spiritually to the place they belong and to her Earthkin (Milroy & Milroy, 2008). Our cultural grandfathers agree, especially if we are to meet the looming and omnipresent ecological and social challenges of our future (Wilson, 2022; Wilson & Spillman, 2021).

In this paper, we explore how an Indigenous Country as Teacher pedagogy might be re-invigorated as an authentically Australian version of PBE for all Australian children. Here, the Country as Teacher pedagogy also operates as a critical pedagogy of place, disrupting Eurocentric and anthropocentric ways in which the Australian Curriculum currently seeks to incorporate Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices. We are not proposing that all Australian children (and teachers) can or should access the full array and depths of local Indigenous knowledges of, and practices with and for, Country: these are realms of sovereignty that belong to local Indigenous custodians. We do argue, however, that all Australian teachers and students have the potential to relate with and learn from Country. The pedagogy that is the focus of our research gives teachers and students opportunity to cultivate a practice of reciprocal ‘Relating with Country’, through which they come to experience Country as Teacher. Through this pedagogy, participants learn more, through direct experiences, about the places in which they live and their Earthkin, and enter into a reciprocal relationship with place, driven by a deepening desire to care for and love these places and Earthkin.

Our Country as Teacher pedagogical research

In solidarity with these authors, Indigenous peoples, and Earthkin across the globe, in 2021, we initiated a two-year research project with 26 teachers from four ACT schools titled ‘Building Cultural Integrity with ‘Country as Teacher’: Investigating teacher engagement with pedagogies of Indigenous knowledge and being’. This project represented our formative efforts to reinstate locally -based, Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogies within mainstream education in Australia, so that teachers and students through engaging in reciprocal Relating with Country, can come to understand, love, and know how to care for the places they inhabit. 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. This research was led by the two primary authors David Spillman and Ben Wilson, both Indigenous educators, scholars, and cultural men in the Lore of Karulkiyalu Country, for which Damu (grandfather) Paul Gordon is the primary Custodian. Damu Paul was recently awarded a Masters of Philosophy for his documentary dissertation ‘Revival of Aboriginal ceremony in NSW’ (Gordon, 2021), demonstrating that whilst Aboriginal men’s ceremonies and cultural practices (on Karulkiyalu Country as elsewhere across NSW) have been disrupted and curtailed through harsh colonial measures, they have remained intact and continuously enacted for tens of thousands of years. Members of the research team also include Monty Nixon and Katharine McKinnon both of settler backgrounds in Australia (Monty) and Aotearoa-New Zealand (Katharine). Ethical permission for this research was sought and obtained from both UC and ACT ED.

In addition, the permission of local Indigenous elders in Ngunnawal Country (Canberra, ACT) to conduct the research was also sought. It was important that approval from First Nations people was gained before conducting the project on their cultural lands and that traditional custodians were invited and in many cases co-presented with project personnel on the Country as Teacher processes. In this way, secret and sacred knowledge was not shared with the participants in the study. Participants were also made aware that if they were to continue their personal practice of Relating with Country, they must over time bring traditional custodians from the Country they inhabit to help add depth, nuance, and authenticity to their growing story of connection. Although severely punctuated by COVID lockdowns, teachers in two of the four schools did succeed in bringing Ngunnawal and other Aboriginal people to assist in this work in their schools. In the next iteration of this research, which focuses on whole-school or whole-cohort approaches, Ngunnawal knowledge holders have been involved from the outset in planning and will be regularly involved in school-based work through 2023–4.

As this work focuses on all teachers and students cultivating practices of Relating with Country, to come to know, love, and learn how to care for their place, it is not possible for the work to be entirely led by local Indigenous elders and knowledge holders. Relating with Country is an imperative that exists for all people as we all come from Mother Earth and are therefore born connected. Furthermore, it offers a unique way for non-Indigenous teachers to show solidarity and kinship with their local Indigenous communities. Relating with Country is based upon Indigenous knowledge systems, and thus, preparatory or initial training should always be facilitated by an Indigenous person—but to suggest that this person must be present for all non-Indigenous learning puts a tremendous burden on the limited number of Indigenous people able to teach this knowledge. Arguably, such a

suggestion also removes the onus of responsibility for non-Indigenous people to further their own understanding of Indigenous knowledge and practices. Relating with Country and the subsequent Country as Teacher experiences that flow is undoubtedly an Indigenous practice—but it is one that all people must take seriously and accept if we are to create a more sustainable, ecologically just society.

Our first paper from the Country as Teacher research project (Spillman et al., 2022) focused on teacher's direct experiences when cultivating a regular personal practice of inner stillness, and looking and listening in-Country, a practice that, following Hughes and Barlo (2021), we call (reciprocal) 'Relating with Country'. The research reported in that paper demonstrated that all teachers who engaged in regular in-Country visits were able, in differing ways and to differing extents, to cultivate a practice of Relating with Country and thus directly experience Country as Teacher in a variety of ways. This transformative learning had clear implications for teacher's wellbeing, engagement, and motivation to incorporate Country as Teacher into daily teaching and learning.

This paper reports on the second phase of our Country as Teacher research project during which teachers designed and facilitated Relating with Country experiences for students within daily teaching and learning. We draw on teachers' reflective narratives regarding their efforts to deliver a Country as Teacher curriculum and their students' responses. In particular, this paper will focus on the ways Country as Teacher operated as a critical pedagogy of place, exemplified through the ways teacher's enactments of Relating with Country worked to challenge or disrupt their perceptions of both what they had 'permission' to teach and of student's capabilities to actively engage a variety of ways of knowing, being, and doing. Both led to some questioning and reinterpreting of systemic pressures and imperatives.

Country as Teacher is a relational pedagogy, not primarily or inherently critical. Furthermore, due to a lack of cultural reflexivity within environmental education, Bowers (2008) has challenged the notion that any PBE can ever constitute a 'critical pedagogy'. Country as Teacher approaches focus on connections and obligations within ecological communities through reinvigorating cross-species kinship. In so doing, it also works to rebalance power relations within those ecological communities, one of the central purposes of critical pedagogy. In such a way, this paper formatively explores the thesis that when a Country as Teacher pedagogy is enacted through Relating with Country practice in our current education system, it nevertheless operates as a critical pedagogy of place. Initially then, this paper discusses the way Country as Teacher approaches may operate as 'new localism' as a 'critical pedagogy of place', disrupting the prioritisation of Eurocentric epistemic power and knowledge production and re-balancing with Indigenous curricula and pedagogies. We

then outline the professional learning and research methodologies adopted in the Country as Teacher project, followed by a discussion of findings. In the "Concluding remarks" section, we consider the implications for school-based curriculum, pedagogy and professional learning, and the capacity of Australian teachers to take greater agency in shifting towards a genuinely Australian PBE, informed by a millennia of Indigenous teaching and learning.

The national Australian Curriculum and Country as Teacher as a critical pedagogy of place

Despite calls for a 'national curriculum' for Australian schools as far back as the 1970s, education has remained in the control of state governments since federalisation. Though an initial agreement to develop some common learning areas was achieved nationally in the nineties, it was not until 2008 that a single political party was in near complete control of state and federal governments and thus in a position to create and roll out a nationalised curriculum. When the Australian Curriculum was finally implemented in January 2011, under the administration of the newly formed Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), there existed three 'Cross-Curricular Priorities' (CCPs) designed to proliferate throughout all the Key Learning Areas (KLAs) of schooling and be the responsibility of each individual teacher to learn about and to implement. The three CCPs were Sustainability, Asia and Australia's Relationship with Asia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures. Over the twelve years since its original inception, the Australian Curriculum has been subject to nine revisions, creating a great deal of consternation, confusion, and frustration among Australian teachers (Lingard, 2018).

In Karulkiyalu Country et al. (2020), we outline how the current goals of schooling in Australia (as outlined at the time on the Australian Government's Department of Education and Training website) reflect a historically situated socio-cultural framing of 'the good life.' The recognition that schooling is designed not just to 'educate' young people, but to produce good citizens and productive workers of the future, is nothing new. Freire (1970), for example, outlined how curriculum and pedagogical processes are shaped by the broader society in which schooling is located, that is, determined through socio-political power dynamics. Thus, the importance and necessity of critical pedagogy becomes clear; it is vital to understand, and where necessary question, the socio-political foundations and agendas of schooling (Freire, 1970; Gruenewald, 2003; McInerney et al., 2011). This is particularly relevant in current educational circumstances with the unwavering policy gaze on employability, economic prosperity, and international competitiveness, and

an associated all-consuming focus on literacy and numeracy (Fogarty et al., 2017; Lingard et al., 2013; Spillman, 2017). Such an approach to schooling is also problematic from an Australian Indigenous standpoint, with Indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogies continuing to be marginalised or subverted. Lowe et al. (2021) have demonstrated that the Australian Curriculum works to reify Eurocentric epistemic power and, ultimately, devalue and erase Indigenous knowledges. Within the Cross-Curricular Priority of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures’, large bodies of Indigenous knowledge are atomised, decontextualised, and ‘incorporated’ to enhance and embellish existing Eurocentric knowledge production (Lowe et al, 2021).

In contrast, McKnight (2016) discusses the importance of relational context for accessing the ‘whole body of knowledge’, pointing out the centrality to Indigenous curricula and pedagogies, of learning ‘with and on Country’. He writes:

To start the journey of learning the whole story or body of knowledge, the learning has to occur with and on Country so the knowledge can be observed, felt and understood on a spiritual level of connectedness. By contrast the classroom closes itself off from the non-human teachers that are required for access to the true body of knowledge. (p. 3)

Learning with and in Country is core to the Country as Teacher pedagogy, which also operates as a critical pedagogy of place deliberately seeking to undermine the reification of Eurocentric epistemic power identified by Lowe et al. (2021). Through Relating with Country practices and experiences that are necessarily place-based, Country as Teacher curricula and pedagogies work to disrupt the anthropocentric, atomistic, globalist, and rational prioritisations of Eurocentric epistemic power and knowledge production. It does this by focusing on Country-centric knowledge acquisition, connectedness, and oneness, through a variety of diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing. In Karulkiyalu Country et al. (2020) with permission from our cultural grandfather Damu Paul Gordon, we offer the ancient Googar story which speaks to the centrality of balancing these diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing both individually and collectively. Here rational, analytical, logical (head), empathetic, moral, motivational, inquisitive (heart-affective), embodied, intuitive, instinctual, spiritual (gut), and inter-generational (wisdom-tail) ways of knowing, being, and doing must all be honoured and in balance for the entire being of Googar to be well. The Country as Teacher approach thus seeks to engage a full range of ways of knowing, being, and doing, offering a way to re-balance mainstream curriculum, and displace Eurocentric epistemologies that privilege rational-analytical ways of knowing above all else.

We are not advocating here to ‘replace’ the Australian Curriculum, as in reject, remove, and put something else

in instead. 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. Our long-term goal is to re-balance this Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy, with Indigenous curricula and pedagogies through the inclusion of Country as Teacher curriculum frameworks alongside the Australian Curriculum. This re-balancing also works to ‘re-place’ education back into Country, into local contexts as advocated through PBE, to reinvigorate that ‘old localism’ as ‘new localism’. We believe this ‘re-balanced’ and ‘re-placed’ approach constitutes an authentically Australian, ‘both-ways’ education for all Australian students, one that is likely over time, to have significant social and ecological benefits.

In this paper, we discuss a way of being that has its roots in a profoundly Indigenous ethic for living—to accept the deep and unconscious connection we have as human beings to the places we inhabit. It is important to note that we suggest this is profoundly Indigenous ethic—but that it is not exclusively available to Indigenous people. Our belief, passed down from our grandfathers, is that such knowledge and ethics should be (and has been throughout history) shared with all people. This is not the same as asserting that all people can claim Aboriginality through a process of Relating with Country or have a right to sacred Indigenous knowledge that belongs to individual groups or knowledge holders. This was made clear to the participants in this study from the first professional development session. Rather, we suggest that this particular ethic of exploring individual connections with place should be taken on by all people as a matter of ecological urgency—nurtured and proliferated through our school system. Such ideology has been promulgated through the work of Callaghan and Gordon (2014, 2022), Milroy and Milroy (2008), McKnight (2015, 2016), and the Bawaka Country et al. (2016). In this way, we suggest that Indigenous knowledge has power, value, and utility in Australian classrooms through enacting this version of ‘new localism’ (Gruenewald & Smith 2007).

Professional learning and research methods

The overall research project adopted a Participatory Action Research approach, including a strong self-reflexive element facilitating participant teacher’s growing self-awareness of the ways they have been socialised into a Eurocentric mindset of educational purpose and system of knowledge (re)production. Here, participants took part in the implementation of the Country as Teacher pedagogy, supported by professional learning and reflection workshops in which the research team and participants collaborated in articulating and learning

from findings. Initially a whole-staff professional learning workshop was facilitated in the four participating schools in late 2020 or early 2021. Here, teachers were involved in acknowledgements of Country and yarning circles to share parts of their stories, enabling the co-creating of cooperative conversational spaces focused on active sharing and listening and non-judgment (Hughes & Barlo, 2021). Following this, we offered our critique of contemporary schooling (Karulkialu Country et al., 2020) allowing time for staff to reflect and yarn. Finally, we outlined our Country as Teacher pedagogy, research milestones, and obligations for participant teachers. From this, twenty-six teachers from the four schools volunteered to participate in the following two years.

A further two-hour workshop was undertaken for participant teachers early in Term One 2021. Following the same cultural protocols, we then further unpacked Country as Teacher pedagogies to highlight the central practice of Relating with Country, with opportunities, challenges, and logistics discussed. Participant teachers began their weekly practice recording reflections on their experiences. Regular check-ins provided collegial support and specific advice. Following one school term of Relating with Country practice, participant teachers gathered in school-based cohorts for a yarning circle focus group where they shared and then made ‘collective sense’ of their experiences. This conversational process, the methods of analysis, and results are outlined more fully in our first research publication (Spillman et al., 2022).

In Term Two 2021, participant teachers began the process of modifying an existing unit of work planned for Term Three, to include regular Relating with Country experiences for students. One-on-one yarns and school-based cohort yarning circles were enacted to share, support, and facilitate these curriculum planning processes. Unit exemplars were provided by research team members using the 6Ls process as the unit pedagogical template. The 6Ls process is Damu Paul Gordon’s reinterpretation of the ancient teaching and learning processes used on Karulkialu Country for tens of thousands of years. In brief, the 6Ls includes a repeated cyclical process of lore, love, look, listen, learn, and lead. Further detail of how it is used as a Country as Teacher pedagogy has been outlined elsewhere (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014; Karulkialu Country et al., 2021). Feedback was provided on each participating teacher’s modified curriculum plans. A major COVID lockdown occurred early in Term Three 2021 from August through to October, causing various degrees of angst amongst teachers and school executives. Some teachers had commenced their modified unit and some had not. Some chose to further modify their units to be facilitated online, again with various support from research investigators. Permission was sought and granted to extend the project timeframe, enabling teachers to continue their units of work into Term Four 2021 and Term One 2022 if they chose. Due to the COVID interruption, planned observations of school-based lessons by research team members could not occur.

At the end of Term Four 2021, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with thirteen teachers who volunteered to take part. These teachers had implemented their modified unit of work, to various degrees and in various ways and in the interviews provided a narrative of their experiences with students through the modified unit of work. They outlined their unit of work, the modifications that had occurred due to COVID, student engagement and learning, and their own perceptions and learning. Some teachers also provided artefacts such as examples of units of work and student work, with several indicating they wished to continue the Country as Teacher work into Term One 2022.

In March 2022, two research team members independently coded interview transcripts to identify emergent themes, looking particularly for aspects of the interviews that demonstrated processes of change, or blockages to change, in the teachers experience. In early June 2022, ten teachers representing the four participating schools undertook a full-day of reflective yarns about their Country as Teacher experiences at Birrigai Outdoor School, ACT. The reflection day included a yarning circle focus group during which each teacher had an opportunity to speak uninterrupted about their experiences of enacting their unit of work, what they did, student engagement and learning, and finally their reflections and learning. Once every participant had contributed, the group engaged in a ‘collective sense making yarn’ (Gorringer & Spillman, 2008). Here, group members make sense of their own data together, through identifying and yarning about patterns of similarity and difference in their narratives. This helped build a collaborative collectivist knowledge base of our shared experiences, on which we can build and extend our approach, consistent with participatory action research. While one research team member facilitated this yarning circle, two colleagues observed, taking extensive notes to capture the *feeling* of the room, noting non-verbal gestures such as body language, facial expressions, and tonality. This yarning session was again recorded and transcribed.

The same two researcher team members who thematically coded participant interviews also coded these transcripts whilst also considering observation notes. This coding along with teacher’s collective sense-making was considered and discussed by the research team, before finally agreeing on the main emerging themes and learnings.

Discussing findings

This section offers an exposition of participating teacher’s reflections from their practice of Relating with Country and the Country as Teacher unit of work undertaken with their students. The description we provide demonstrates how the Country as Teacher approach operated as critical pedagogy of place for the participants in the study.

Enacting ‘new localism’: ‘speaking back’ to educational hegemony through ‘Relating with Country’

The aim of Relating with Country is to come to know and care for Country through extended and sustained experiences of Country as Teacher (Callaghan & Gordon, 2014, 2022; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020). The belief that cultivating a practice of Relating with Country is available to everyone was strongly reinforced through research findings outlined in our first paper, with regard to teachers (Spillman et al., 2022). Yet, as previously mentioned, such knowledge and pedagogies are not explicitly included, nor implied in the Australian Curriculum. Further to this, whilst ‘Country / Place’ is a central concept in the Cross-Curricular Priority, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures’, ‘many teachers use it to teach (about) Country because they are required to do so’ (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2019, p.3).

One of the significant outcomes of the Country as Teacher approach was that all participant teachers in the CaT project felt they gained or claimed ‘permission’ in different ways, to attempt something different or outside the usually accepted teaching and learning practice, especially within the contested space of ‘incorporating Indigenous perspectives’ (Lowe et al, 2021). This ‘permission’ was felt to alleviate symptoms of anxiety and mistrust of bureaucracies noted elsewhere (Baker & Allely, 2022; Buchanan, 2021). We suggest that the enactment of Country as Teacher thus constituted, in different ways and to different extents, a critical pedagogy of place for participating teachers and their students. To interrogate this proposition, two main themes emerging from the data will be discussed below, ‘[Teacher’s shifting perceptions and motivations](#)’ and ‘[Student engagement with Country as Teacher pedagogy](#).’

Teacher’s shifting perceptions and motivations

Melissa, an early year teacher, suggested that the approach taken through this work enabled them (teachers) to overcome the fear that they are ‘going to do something wrong, or say something that’s not appropriate, especially being non-Indigenous ourselves’, a sentiment shared by many of her peers. Such fears are documented in the literature (Burgess et al., 2022). Craig, a secondary Health and Physical Education (HPE) teacher expressed, ‘this programme has given us the opportunity to say, ‘Hey I can do this!’ The biggest thing is permission.’ It was also noted and broadly accepted among participants that the strong focus within ACT ED on ‘cultural integrity’ worked to ‘allow and encourage’ alternative approaches to school-based teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, even in supportive jurisdictions and schools, pressures for teacher performativity and

accountability in terms of curriculum delivery and student achievement are strong (Ball, 2003). This was especially noted by participant teachers working in primary, years 7–10 high schools, and senior college contexts. Whilst talking about the challenges of enacting a Country as Teacher approach in his class, Simon, an experienced upper primary teacher participant explained:

It’s so hard when you have this very [sighs] intellectual - or not intellectual, academic - box ticking. It feels a very inside oriented kind of curriculum mandate, and also just a culture of how you should do things...

A secondary HPE participant teacher, Craig, likened the effort required to maintain Relating with Country learning experiences, to ‘swimming against the current’. None of his learning area colleagues were involved in the Country as Teacher project, and his experience was challenging, interspersed with only short periods of relief and respite when momentarily ‘caught in an eddy’ of inspiration or conversation with students. Despite this, in both the interviews and especially in the yarning circle, there was a palpable sense of optimism, commitment, and solidarity, expressed by many participant teachers and noticed by all project researchers.

Melissa, the experienced preschool participant teacher, spoke about a motivating ‘emotional shift’ that had occurred for her through this work:

I feel quite passionate about what you’ve all introduced, and allowed us to be part of actually, because, you know, I’ve been teaching for over 20 years. I think it’s the most authentic way that I’ve come across, and not only authentic, but accessible. I find it a very mindful approach, and the more I get to know, I guess, Aboriginal people and their cultures, the more mindful I find them and their cultures, and that takes a great listening rather than focus on the doing.

A number of participants, especially though not exclusively in the early and primary years, reflected that students’ strong engagement and positive responses to experiences of Relating with Country, conferred permission to continue routinely incorporating this pedagogy into their school days. This despite the belief it was not a direct enactment of the Australian Curriculum, though aspects of Country as Teacher student-led inquiry were often linked back to student learning outcomes from the Australian Curriculum. Isabella, an experienced teacher, outlined how when she began this Country as Teacher work; she quickly became aware that her year three students ‘didn’t know their story of place’. Isabella decided to commit an entire term’s work to place-based, Country-centric student inquiry, focusing on wetlands not far from the school. Isabella called it ‘going rogue’ reflecting:

I managed to implement it into everything that we did in every part of every day, and it was amazing. And I was so blessed. I got a general permission note that said we could go to the wetlands whenever we felt like it, and we did, we went down [regularly]. Caring for that Country and noticing the plants and birds, and I had the whole term, just with my class to do that, and it was so totally amazing.

Isabella noted the continuously strong engagement and learning of her students, particularly regarding the ways plants and birds live and are connected to each other and the wetlands. The work included making contact and collaborating with a local wetland management group, comprised almost entirely of elderly, voluntary community members. Subsequently, through sharing and discussing the story of this work with colleagues, ‘quite a big group’ of other teachers in the school ‘jumped on board.’ For Isabella, it was about claiming ‘permission’ and being morally strong to say, ‘You can teach these things. You’ve just got to change your mind. You have to do it for the students.’ In discussing this inner battle between the imperatives of an ethic of giving students what they need and systemic requirements, Simon offered:

You’re constantly battling between how do I manage my load and feel like I’m doing the job that I’ve been asked to do and then going, [pause] but actually part of my job that’s probably less explicitly stated - and it’s probably more of a moral imperative - to move these kids towards a more holistic, less anthropocentric, relationship with the world.

Initially through their own direct experiences of Relating with Country (Spillman et al., 2022), and then through their courage and effort to provide similar opportunities to their students, many participant teachers were able to ‘speak back’ to systemic accountabilities and pressures, even if these existed substantially at the level of perception within these supportive schools and jurisdictions. Year one participant teacher Margo captures this sentiment.

It’s the simplistic appreciation, really, of Country. Everything I’ve personally experienced - you kind of just go oh, there’s so much more we could learn, so many things we could simplify. It’s more enriching, I suppose, when Country’s involved. I wish I had done it more, and I’m really thankful that I now know these things and have felt these things, because it’ll be something that I try and implement so much more in the years to come.

All teachers who participated in yarning circle focus groups and interviews agreed that their personal experiences Relating with Country and thus Country as Teacher were necessary to provide the motivation and courage to enact

Country as Teacher approaches with their students. With regard to Craig’s metaphor of ‘swimming against the current’, it was also agreed that a more collaborative, cooperative involvement of teaching peers would enhance support and reduce the challenges. Gabriella a year three participating teacher agreed, reinforcing the importance of this shared personal experience in this way.

It’s hard. I find that sometimes tricky because we’re all so inspired and have an inspiring ability about things. But getting other people to get that as well, it’s hard. You can’t just talk to them about it. They need to have it and go do it and experience it. So I feel like that’s why this programme and what we’re doing here is so, so important, because we need that, because if everyone did it, imagine how better off our world would be. Sorry I went real big. [laughter]

Old Aboriginal lore stories also helped teachers to take up these challenges. The vast majority of participant teacher’s narratives, both through interviews and the yarning circle, were imbued with emotionality, verbally and viscerally, variously in the form of excitement, gratitude, amazement, enrichment, inspiration, curiosity, wonder, and surprise along with frustration, moments of anxiety, and sometimes confusion. It is clear from working and talking with participating teachers that many of them understand the necessity and urgency of reinstating this balance within our day-to-day teaching and learning, as exemplified here by Melissa, talking about the Googar story mentioned above.

the Googar story is powerful because I think, whether it’s from expectations from above and also perhaps naturally as teachers, we are into [laughs] controlling things... I’ve also found the Googar story so powerful because that balance is just so important. You know, let us come back to the heart of things...

Student engagement with Country as Teacher pedagogy

Time Relating with Country is not primarily playtime. Nor is it being outside, on-Country whilst focused on another pursuit or distraction, e.g. exercising, playing sport, walking and talking, or listening to music or a podcast. Following their personal experiences of cultivating a practice of Relating with Country, the majority of participant teachers indicated they simply modified what they were asked to do, in ways appropriate for their students. Year one teacher Kathleen described her initial focus in Country as:

teaching them to slow down and become aware of things... it’s quiet, it’s no talking time, and kids have certain places... we go out and find a special place,

and just sit out on Country and it was amazing. Once we saw how the kids reacted to that, oh right, we go out pretty much every day ... they've all got a spot and they just go and sit.

Margo, one of Kathleen's colleagues, continued the story, referring also to the yarning circles undertaken after *Relating with Country* practice, to facilitate students' discussion of their experiences:

Then it just became second nature to them. I think it gave them a real genuine connection with Country. I think because we talk about it a lot.

Primary sustainability teacher, Elly, expressed some initial but unnecessary concern, when taking twenty to thirty students of various ages out in-Country: 'I think I was more nervous about that than I actually should have been, because they all love to go out and they find it really refreshing and peaceful and calming.' Early childhood and primary participant teachers expressed surprise and amazement at the length of time most young children were able to be still and look and listen in-Country. This surprise can be well understood when considering the perceptions some teachers have of how young children are socialised within contemporary society. Here's how Kathleen put it.

we have a new generation of children, that we're bringing up these days, who get all this - they need all this instant feedback constant stimulation, and they don't know how to just sit and be.

For Kathleen and Margo, these initial student experiences of *Relating with Country* flowed into a unit focused on minibeasts and their micro-environments. Both pointed out that whilst the same unit they have taught in previous years, obvious differences this time were students' 'real caring lens', the demonstrated desire to look after both minibeasts and their environments, and their expressions of awe and gratitude for what they found, clearly drawing heavily on the 'heart' of *Googar*. Both participant teachers reported that with this regular *Relating with Country* practice followed by yarning circles, their students 'settle a lot quicker' when back inside and have developed a 'close knit' sense of 'community' or 'family where conflicts are fewer and better resolved' through yarning circles when they do occur.

Gabriella, a year three participant teacher, began by taking her class outside for thirty minutes each day. Initially, these sessions were structured into 'free play' around creating stories in groups, incorporating Earth-kin into these stories. In the yarning circle reflection time that followed, Gabriella asked primarily about what students had noticed, the details around which they had built their stories. According to Gabriella, with repeated sessions, this worked to focus and enhance their sensory awareness. She reported

that 'trees' were a recurring theme in these yarns. Early on, they had talked about how 'roots are like hands that hold the earth', linking to an old Aboriginal story of reciprocity between a tree and a rock. This further catalysed discussion about the symbiotic relationships between trees and the earth. In a subsequent session, students began talking about all the things that trees provide, shade, homes, and shelter for birds and other animals. One student offered that 'leaves help you breathe', a statement that sparked a huge amount of curiosity among the class. 'In some ways that was the clincher for us as trees are so integral to everything', Gabriella reported. Through students' direct experience in-Country, a substantial classroom inquiry process about trees unfolded, one that enhanced students understanding of how everything in-Country interacts and is connected. Through this engaging and enjoyable curriculum, facilitated and scaffolded in-Country by Gabriella, students had led themselves to a knowing as old as humanity, the centrality of trees to all life. This was a simple yet valuable enactment of *Country as Teacher*. We suspect many of these students will continue to connect with and be curious about trees. In many Indigenous societies, trees are recognised as important ancestors and teachers (Milroy & Milroy, 2008; Wall-Kimmerer, 2013).

Despite early perceptions that *Relating with Country* experiences might be difficult to justify and position within a crowded, outcome-based curriculum, in different ways, upper primary and secondary participant teachers were able to redesign existing units of work to build upon these as foundational rather than additional experiences. Amelia, a year seven English teacher, modified a poetry unit into 'Poetry on Country'. Commencement of the unit coincided with COVID lockdown in the ACT, in 2021. This was, according to Amelia, 'actually an ideal situation' as, under these circumstances, their time in-Country became 'more valuable to them'. A number of early classes were dedicated to *Relating with Country* practice, followed by structured yarns, online, around sensory descriptions and expressions of feelings and experience. A variety of poetry focused on Country or place was analysed and discussed. Indigenous knowing of trees holding stories and songs (Wall-Kimmerer, 2013; Milroy & Milroy, 2008; Lyons, 2012) was engaged and discussed. Whilst under the circumstances the unit was somewhat disrupted, in summary, Amelia said a significant number of students had indicated that during COVID, 'spending time on Country made [them] feel a lot better, [and that] there was a lot of things [that did this]'.

Other secondary teachers also reported high levels of student engagement. Tiana a year nine/ten art teacher planned three *Relating with Country* visits to a local wildlife reserve, each to be transformed into a design, cut into a lino print, with the finished product expressing the student's feelings and experiences from the three visits. While only undertaking one visit prior to COVID lockdown, Tiana reported

that many students continued their Relating with Country practice. Commenting on reflective yarning circles on their return to school Tiana indicated that whilst there were different ‘levels of engagement’ and depths of understanding, she felt that most students ‘got it’ and were keen to continue in-Country learning. Kevin a year 11/12 biology teacher decided to enact Relating with Country practice within a unit called ‘Biodiversity and Interconnectedness’. Like Tiana, he also only got one session before COVID lockdown but also noted the high level of student engagement and levity when walking and sitting in-Country. He also noted that these experiences provided the impetus and opportunity for a ‘very introverted student’ who had rarely conversed directly with him during the year, to begin a conversation with him that lasted for the entire return walk to school. Like many of these secondary teachers, Kevin had already begun planning the enactment of Country as Teacher in units for 2023.

Concluding remarks

This paper began with the proposition that both PBE and critical pedagogies of place, as discussed and outlined by Gruenewald and Smith (2007), McInerney et al. (2011), and Sepie (2017), among a host of others, are experiencing a resurgence in modern Australian schools because of a sustained interest from educators throughout the Country. We suggest, however, that there is a gap in both the literature and pedagogical practice for PBE in Australia, one that offers engagement with Indigenous knowledge and practices for Relating with Country. This gap can be filled by accessing and implementing Indigenous, Country-centric pedagogies in mainstream classrooms. Country as Teacher asks teachers to firstly cultivate a personal practice of Relating with Country, and then to analyse and utilise their experiences to better plan for and meet the needs of their students. While in Australia there have been other attempts to embed Indigenous knowledge in classrooms, primarily facilitated by ACARA to meet growing unrest and confusion among teachers trying to satisfy the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Cross Curricular Priority, these attempts focus almost exclusively on Indigenous elaborations or augmentations being added to Key Learning Areas, working to reify established educational priorities and outcomes. Our formative research here suggests that participant teachers in the Country as Teacher project were able to either consciously or inadvertently ‘speak back to’ (their perceptions of) systems of educational governance and accountability—remaking their student’s education in a way better able to honour their capacity to ‘learn about and care for ecological and social wellbeing of the communities they inhabit’ (McInerney et al. 2011, p.5).

The professional learning practices and experiences we report in this paper comprise relatively short initial,

intensive face-to-face sessions, followed by months of personal practice, professional reflection, and conversation, culminating in the re-evaluation and rewriting of discrete units of work. The participants are by no means now ‘experts’ in Country as Teacher, nor have they reached that same level of understanding as the Traditional Knowledge holders on whose experiences and designs we have based our work. But their experiences do demonstrate what is possible when non-Indigenous teachers take seriously the challenge of true Indigenisation of their subject areas.

We argue that the Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy was able to operate as a critical pedagogy of place, even though a relational pedagogy. This is demonstrated in the experiences shared by participant teachers throughout their engagement with Country as Teacher. Throughout the project, teachers drew on their own direct, individual, and collective experiences Relating with Country to design and facilitate Country as Teacher curriculum for their students. In all cases, this involved embracing a diverse array of ways of knowing, being, and doing in-Country, rather than prioritising rational-analytical thinking in the classroom and/or on a screen. All teachers either modified existing units of work or like Isabella, initiated an entirely new approach. All created protocols and tools for evaluating and assessing student engagement and learning. In these ways, as advocated by Sahlberg (2017), they drew on ‘small data’ to monitor student’s engagement and learning, rather than allowing ‘big data’ to set the agenda entirely. The experience shared by teachers reinforced the importance of strong focus on relationality and connectedness both with Country/Earthkin and each other, including for example the importance of convening yarning circles after Relating with Country experiences, to share, discuss, and learn from each other. They also offer multiple stories of students learning directly from Country and Earthkin through looking, listening, feeling, and getting curious. Based on this formative evidence, we argue that, through this research project, participating teachers and students were able to either consciously or inadvertently challenge or disrupt the hegemonic focus within the Australian Curriculum, on anthropocentrism, atomism, rational-analytical thinking, and the associated standardised ‘big data’.

Participant teachers were also clear and unanimous that their personal experiences cultivating practices of Relating with Country, and subsequently their direct experiences learning from Country and Earthkin (discussed in the Phase 1 publication, see Spillman et al., 2022), were necessary to engender the understanding, motivation, and courage to enact a Country as Teacher approach with students. This confirms for us that direct experience in-Country is a vital prerequisite to designing units of work for the classroom. Here, Australian teachers do not have to wonder if this is ‘coming to a place near you?’ as McInerney et al. (2011) put it. They can commit now, to being outside regularly, looking, listening, and feeling Country and

Earthkin, enacting their own agency in this space. The research also pointed to the importance of engaging with the Country as Teacher approach collectively. In response, our next iteration of Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy research will enact whole-of-school and whole-of-cohort approaches (e.g. learning area, year levels, stage of schooling).

We anticipate that a stronger cooperative, collaborative, collegial approach will strengthen the contribution to a critical pedagogy of place in the face of an increasingly strenuous focus on the individualisation of education, in terms of the standardisation of both teacher and student capabilities. In the long term, we look forward to a future in which all schools in Australia offer all students an authentically Australian, ‘both-way’ education where a Country as Teacher curriculum and pedagogy sits alongside the Australian Curriculum.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval Ethical permissions for this research was sought and obtained from both the Human Research Ethics Committee, UC and from ACT ED. Written informed consent was provided by all research participants.

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