Office of the Board of Studies NSW

Community Capacity Research Project

Final Report
10 April 2006

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# Office of the Board of Studies NSW

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Study Synopsis

The *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project formed the overarching framework for school and community people to collaboratively develop and implement appropriate and relevant mathematics teaching strategies to enhance the learning outcomes for Aboriginal students. The prime purposes of the review reported here were to examine the processes and identify critical elements that impacted upon the building of community capacity across the two project sites of Gilgandra and Doonside. Two frameworks for evaluating the effectiveness of community capacity were developed [*Framework for Successful Community Capacity Building; Five Challenges*]. Additionally, a social justice based framework for examining curriculum initiatives engaging Aboriginal people in schools [*Framework for Engaged Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives*] was applied. The report describes the case study processes involved, provides a voice to the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people involved and identifies the significant features involved for people as they build their community capacity. It concludes with seven recommendations for future action.
Introduction

This community capacity project has evolved out of considered engagement between schools and their communities in the development and implementation of contextualised and relevant mathematics curriculum teaching and learning units. This development has come as a direct result of the NSW Board of Studies’ project titled, *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* (1999-2005) which has been sited in both rural and urban communities comprising Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. A significant factor in this project has been the explicit involvement and engagement of Aboriginal parents and community. Such engagement has enhanced the school-community capacity through parent and community involvement in schools and in the development of mutual trust.

From 1999-2005, the Board of Studies NSW in conjunction with the NSW Department of Education, Australian Catholic University and University of Western Sydney, have worked with schools and community members at Crawford Public School (Doonside) and Gilgandra Public and High Schools in the project titled *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts*. These two sites, urban and rural respectively, were selected because of the significant enrolment of Aboriginal students in the schools. The project focused on establishing a learning team comprising teachers, Aboriginal educators and local Aboriginal community people to develop contextual multistage mathematics units that suit the learning needs of Aboriginal children. The mathematics activities reflected each community’s knowledge, engaged the students in meaningful learning, created closer school/community links and brought cross-cultural groups together. An underlying principle of the project was having the school seen as a centre, with community and school working together to develop curriculum which enhanced the knowledge and the capacity of the Aboriginal students, community and school.

Building community capacity was a key element of *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts*. The overall aim of the project was to identify key aspects of meaningful engagement between schools and Aboriginal communities in the development and implementation of contextualised, relevant and connected mathematics curriculum and teaching and learning strategies to enhance Aboriginal students’ mathematics outcomes. Thus, the significant factor in this project has been the explicit involvement and engagement of Aboriginal parents and community in mathematics curriculum development. Such engagement aims to enhance the school-community capacity through parent and community involvement in mathematics development and in the strengthening of mutual trust. The participants included: Aboriginal educators; Aboriginal parents and community people; primary and secondary teachers; teacher mentors; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students; NSW Board of Studies personnel and university mentors.

This initiative was based upon the principle that the mutually beneficial engagement of people and cultures is essential in developing a community’s capacity for educating Aboriginal students. According to Matthews, Howard, and Perry (2003), “educating Aboriginal students requires Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers to understand the needs and cultures in which each Aboriginal student lives” (p. 18). This understanding is developed through engagement and discourse with Aboriginal students, Aboriginal educators and Aboriginal communities or people.
The *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project emphasised the building of community capacity through developing clear links between schools and Aboriginal community that:

- supported effective mathematics teaching and learning practices;
- encouraged active engagement in school mathematics curriculum development and delivery;
- provided opportunities for the exchange of information between teachers and the Aboriginal community;
- developed teacher understanding of the expectations of parents in relation to students’ mathematical learning;
- developed parents’ understanding of the mathematics syllabus and the teacher’s expectations of the Aboriginal students; and
- developed trust and respect between Aboriginal parents and teachers.

Strong partnerships established between schools and Aboriginal communities can improve educational outcomes for Australian Aboriginal students (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). The development of such partnerships requires time, commitment, genuine consultation, mutual respect and active listening through shared discussion between those in the school and the community. In the mathematics classroom, Aboriginal students' mathematical learning takes place within social and cultural contexts. In Australia, Aboriginal students are “often confronted with numeracy practices that have more in common with the experiences of children from completely different social backgrounds’ (Kemp, 1999, p. 14). When Aboriginal communities, teachers and Aboriginal students collaboratively address issues of identity, biculturalism and cultural conflicts in Aboriginal student’s mathematics learning through teaching strategies and community capacity building, changes in curriculum and Aboriginal student learning outcomes can occur.
Literature Review

There are two key sections of the literature review. The first section reviews critical elements in enhancing community capacity whilst the second presents a set of criteria whereby school curriculum, in this instance, mathematics curriculum, can be rendered appropriate to the local community. A focus of the review is on the elements of community capacity and curriculum development that impact upon communities containing a significant number of Aboriginal people.

Focus for enhancing community capacity

This community capacity building project acknowledges the critical importance of schools and communities collaborating to enhance the education of Aboriginal children. Goals of the project include developing culturally appropriate learning contexts and outcomes for Aboriginal students in schools, and enhancing the capacity of the school and Aboriginal community to relate and collaborate in ways which empower all participants to have a voice in the education of Aboriginal students. This initiative of the Board of Studies NSW is based upon the principle that the mutually beneficial engagement of people and cultures is essential in developing a community’s capacity for educating Aboriginal students. The needs and cultures of Aboriginal students need to be understood by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers (Matthews, et al., 2003). This understanding is developed through the openness of educators in engagement and discourse with Aboriginal students, Aboriginal educators and Aboriginal communities or people.

Our understanding of the nature and role of such community capacity building is informed by examining the:
• place of this project within current political, social and educational contexts;
• nature of community capacity building; and
• challenges this capacity building offers teachers and communities.

Political, social and educational contexts

In this project, priority is given to the voices of Aboriginal people and students as an essential means to enhancing the cultural appropriateness and educational potential of learning goals and strategies for Aboriginal students. The project helps support Aboriginal people to be involved as decision makers in system wide and local policies regarding the nature and form of education for Aboriginal students.

This project is timely within the wider political, social and educational contexts of today. These contexts emphasise “markets” as a key determinant of policies whether they be corporate markets or the community markets of school. Markets have become the ground in which …

The rise and rise of the arithmetic as a social imaginary signifier (Castoriadis, 1997) has had a profound shaping effect on the way we construct our sense of self and our relations with each other. And so we may see that education is increasingly dedicated to the production of more goods and services; that is, for the economy. Number drives the economy, and the child’s education is driven by number because her education serves the economy. So it is that the individualised person is a number in the mass. Education for the self (or the community) is
submerged in a discourse of number metamorphosed into the discourse of economic processes (Conroy, 2004, p. 6).

In the functional world of markets, learning targets for school, class and individual reports are used as a basis for benchmarks and measures which describe and report upon institutional and personal achievements for the market. Within this educational market place learning and schooling goals for Aboriginal students and communities, who value people and relationships, need to be conceptualised and stated in ways which contribute to their capacities and identities as learners. Learning strategies need to emphasise the social meanings of learning (Dawe, 1995) which are, at times, to either co-exist or be integrated with the functionality of learning. Attending to the social and cultural meanings of learning goals requires learners and educators to participate in a discourse of exploration and engagement with cultures. Such a learning discourse is different in its goals and strategies from one based upon production and consumption designed to achieve closure in terms of benchmarks, competencies and testing.

**Nature of community capacity building**

Community capacity can be described as the bringing together of the community’s knowledge, skills, commitment and resourcefulness to build on community strengths and address community challenges (McGinty, 2002). Community capacity building involves both attending to the foundations of the capacity and taking the capacity beyond where it is at present. Attending to the foundations requires establishing the processes for engaging with community and exploring culture – in this case, the cultures of the Aboriginal and school communities. Taking the capacity beyond its present level involves both taking the community to different levels of the capacity and extending it to new forms of the capacity. The foci of the capacity building lie within and across both the school community and the Aboriginal community. Engagement that is respectful of and sensitive to the values of these communities and cultures is key to community capacity building.

While a primary focus for the capacity building is the students themselves, it also includes the students’ families, Aboriginal community members, non-Aboriginal community members, teachers, Aboriginal educators, and other school staff. Enhancing the community’s capacity requires that attention be given both to the capacities of the individual people, particularly the Aboriginal students, and to the capacity of the community as a whole.

**Challenges**

Community capacity building means that school leaders, teachers, community leaders and members are involved in a process of mutually beneficial engagement through a discourse of relationships and exploration. Relationships of respect and trust are the gateway to effective engagement. School leaders and teachers are challenged in the first instance to move beyond the educational model of “teacher and taught” to one of mutual respect and engagement with the Aboriginal community as learning partners.

Community capacity building challenges schools and teachers to learning approaches which are based upon the mutual engagement of the school and the community. Schools are to move beyond approaches which assume that schools alone
have responsibility for ensuring learning is related or applied to students’ contemporary world and cultural contexts as one of the criteria for quality teaching and learning (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003). A second challenge requires educators to move beyond the triarchic model of minority children’s school achievement which includes factors that educators can potentially influence (Okagaki, 2001). The leadership and power lie within and across the school and Aboriginal communities rather than with the school alone. The integrity of leadership lies in the capacity to engage and explore in an alternative and open discourse which will inform approaches to education and learning for Aboriginal students.

A third challenge for schools and teachers lies in their stance with respect to quantifiable measures of student capacities that are used as benchmarks for public reporting and accountability. These may be student attendance, progression and retention data, as well as state and national numeracy and literacy assessments. These evidence-based measures, which report upon student behaviours, performance and competencies inform one’s understanding of the learner and learning but do not define or bring closure to a student’s capacity. They do not provide a holistic evidence base to inform teachers or the community of either the actual or the potential learning capabilities of Aboriginal students. Such a depth of informing requires educators to consider a further register of indicators and evidence which includes assessment and purposeful observations that are culturally inclusive regarding Aboriginal student learning.

A fourth challenge for schools and teachers is to engage with communities in the mutual development of home-community-school alignment. Alton-Lee (2003) found that for most effective student learning outcomes there needs to be an alignment of capacities across student, teachers, and the school community as a whole. This requires teachers to value community contexts and their strengths. Schools and teachers are challenged to engage with the community and cultural ecologies of the children’s worlds (Barton, 1994) in ways which change school and teacher approaches so that they are more aligned with these ecologies. School leaders and teachers develop the cultural and educational alignment of school and community through enhancing their own capacity to think with the cultural perspectives of the students and their communities (Bernstein, 1996).

A fifth challenge underlying a school and teacher’s capacity to enhance the education of Aboriginal students lies in developing their own personal and collective efficacy for community engagement. Educators and researchers are challenged to see teacher efficacy as being multi-dimensional including not only their current pedagogical focus on teaching and classroom management (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) but also their efficacy to engage with the community (Labone, 2004). The development of school and teachers’ capacities to engage with the Aboriginal communities will be sensitive to these communities developing the efficacy of community members to engage with the school.

In summary, community capacity building for enhancing the education of Aboriginal students presents schools and teachers with the Five Challenges of:

- mutual respect for the Aboriginal community;
- mutual engagement with the community in developing learning approaches based upon alternative and creative discourses;
• evidence based discourses to inform one’s understanding of learners and learning;
• mutual development of home-school-community alignment for enhancing student learning; and
• personal and collective efficacy for community engagement.

These five challenges pose a framework for engaging and exploring with the school and Aboriginal communities their community capacity building to enhance the education of Aboriginal students.

A goal of community capacity building is a justice-based approach to Aboriginal education. Within the *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project the curriculum focus of Aboriginal students’ learning of mathematics was the specific vehicle for enhancing community capacity. Thus, the second section of this literature review focuses on justice elements related to the teaching and learning of mathematics with Aboriginal students.

**Mathematics and Aboriginal students’ learning**

All education, including mathematics education, needs to be a ‘place of belonging’ for Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students need to feel that schools belong to them as much as to any other child. School success for Aboriginal students is dependent upon “cultural appropriateness, development of requisite skills and adequate levels of participation” (Elson-Green, 1999, p.12). To move towards the achievement of potential by Aboriginal students it is important that Aboriginal culture and language are accepted in the classroom and students have a sense of belonging (French, French, Matthews, Stephens, & Howard, 1994). Developing a shared understanding and appreciation of the beliefs of the culturally diverse groups involved in mathematics learning can help lessen cultural conflict in the mathematics classroom and place more focused attention on the learning potential of Aboriginal students. It is important to reform school environments where Aboriginal students learn “… (for without reform) methodology will tend to reproduce social inequalities of achievement and subordinate individual development to social domination” (Teese, 2000, p. 8).

Aboriginal people are learners in two worlds. Parents, teachers and students need to come together to “embark on a program of truly multicultural instruction which both recognises and actively utilises the Aboriginal child’s skills and knowledge” (Guider, 1991, p. 51). Aboriginal people have the "source of knowledge of their own needs, their learning process and the ways in which learning takes place and the most effective ways and environments in which ... (they) learn" (Sherwood & McConville, 1994, p. 40).

As well, “the ethnic and cultural experiences of the knower are epistemologically significant because these factors influence knowledge construction, use and interpretation” (Banks, 1993, p. 6). Cultural identity is a major issue for Aboriginal people. No matter where an Aboriginal child lives it is likely he/she will identify with aspects of Aboriginal culture (Gibson, 1993; Guider 1991). Identity is personal and evolves as individuals grow in the knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and as they respond to varying places and circumstances (Groome, 1995). A significant problem in educating Aboriginal students has been the failure to recognise their
Aboriginality, which is the basis upon which Aboriginal students grow, develop and relate to those about them, including their teachers.

Howard (2001) reported Aboriginal beliefs about mathematics, mathematics teaching and mathematical learning. The identification and reporting of these mathematical beliefs help inform teachers and Aboriginal communities about required reform in mathematics teaching to enhance Aboriginal students’ mathematical learning. Learning mathematics is a process of sociocultural interaction (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). All students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, will meet cultural conflicts in their mathematics classrooms. For Aboriginal students, such cultural conflict may occur through the teaching strategies being used, the lack of relevance of mathematics activities, confusion in the mathematics language being used or the lack of awareness of the social, cultural and historical issues that Aboriginal students bring to the mathematics classroom. Teachers have to become aware of, and appreciate, the cultural diversity and hence the cultural conflicts that can occur amongst teachers, students, parents and the curriculum content. They need to understand where the school conflicts originate for Aboriginal students in order to implement effective pedagogy. Appropriate curriculum can enhance the mathematics achievement of Aboriginal students through its relevance, appreciation of the complexity of the mathematical language and presentation of practical mathematical learning activities (Howard & Perry, 2005).

The following constructs have been derived from an appreciation of the contexts of Aboriginal education (NSW Department of School Education, 1996), national mathematics project reports (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b), analysis of interviews with Aboriginal people (Howard, 2001) and national professional development initiatives (Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council, 2003). The seven constructs that comprise the Framework for Engaged Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives are:

- social justice;
- empowerment;
- engagement;
- reconciliation;
- self-determination;
- connectedness; and
- relevance.

These focus discussion around the imperative of acknowledging and appreciating the place of social justice in Aboriginal students’ learning of mathematics and can be explained as follows (Matthews, et al., 2003).

**Social justice** is about treating all people with dignity and respect. It is about a community recognising and acknowledging injustices and the development of appropriate actions and processes to address these injustices for individuals or groups so that there is a degree of equality in the overall outcomes. It is about a freedom of choice. It is about living with your own rights and beliefs and not those imposed from others. It is about your right to be who you are. In this paper, it is about being Aboriginal.

**Empowerment** is gaining the necessary knowledge to impact upon change that is essential for effective educational outcomes. It is about Aboriginal people making
decisions and sharing their knowledge and skills with others. Being empowered is about making a difference.

**Engagement** is being able to interact purposefully with the discourse around mathematics learning. It is about being excited about what you are doing. It is about being treated as a capable learner. It is about respect and positive interactions.

**Reconciliation** is about walking in someone else’s shoes. It is about taking the time to listen and to care. It is about working together. It is about sharing and understanding the diversity of culture. It is about appreciating people and their values, language and learning styles. It is about recognising and appreciating difference.

**Self-determination** is political. Aboriginal people are a minority people in their own country. To achieve self-determination, there need to be Aboriginal people in control and making decisions. It cannot happen when there is always a non-Aboriginal person with the power to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as to what can happen. Individually it can be achieved - you can determine for yourself if you have access to health, education and support.

**Connectedness** is a sense of belonging. A feeling of being accepted, knowing that you have as much right to be in a place as any other person. The need for Aboriginal students to know that people (teachers) like you, relate to you for who you are. It is about the need to implement the talk. It is about honesty, integrity, being a critical friend in what you bring to any given situation as an important person within the Australian society.

**Relevance** is about bringing the Aboriginal students’ environments into the mathematics classroom. It is about providing Aboriginal students with the necessary mathematical skills to enable them to look beyond their horizons. It is about Aboriginal country, Aboriginal nations. It is about where an Aboriginal student lives and using that country in mathematics curriculum, teaching and learning. It is tokenistic to think of relevance being only the application of Aboriginal motifs to classroom materials. The relevance is in how, why and who make the motifs and how the materials are used. The Aboriginal perspective and relevance is in the process of developing the mathematics materials.

The mathematical education of Aboriginal students is challenging, but if teachers, students, parents and Aboriginal people work collectively towards solutions, the mathematical learning outcomes of Aboriginal students through the enhanced community capacity can be enhanced. Ensuring such an emphasis on community capacity building will “empower Aboriginal parents and carers to encourage and support their children’s learning about their traditional heritage as well as the business of schooling and training” (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc./NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004, pp. 204-205).
Methodology

This research project focused on three NSW schools in the urban community of Doonside (Crawford Public School) and rural Gilgandra. (A brief description of each of these contexts is provided in the relevant case study reports following this section.) These schools were chosen based on the collaboration between the Aboriginal community and school in previous Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts activities. Each site identified an Aboriginal educator as the key project link between the school and the Aboriginal community.

Qualitative data about building community capacity through meaningful engagement in the Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts project were collected by the authors during a number of school visits through semi-structured interviews with various participants. During 2005, three interview visits were made to each site. These visits maintained a presence of the researchers in the school community sites enabling an ongoing evaluation of the project and its progress with both school staff and community people. Prior to the initial visits to both Gilgandra and Doonside communities, discussions with the school principals, the relevant NSW Department of Education and Training District Superintendents and Aboriginal community people were held to clarify the project’s focus and intended outcomes.

The first visit (Term 2, 2005) focused on discussions with Aboriginal educators and teachers to establish protocols for later discussions with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal community people. The second visit (Term 3, 2005) focused on discussions with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal community people and follow-up discussions with Aboriginal educators and teachers. The third visit (Term 4, 2005) enabled the follow up and completion of discussions with all participants. A fourth visit (Term 1, 2006) was an opportunity for school teachers, Aboriginal educators and community people to comment on the initial categorization of data to ensure that it was a valid representation of participants’ views.

The first trip to Gilgandra included visits to both Gilgandra HS and Gilgandra PS. The day (Friday, June 3) involved an extensive discussion with the Aboriginal educators, Mathematics staff, the Principal and members of the Human Society and Its Environment staff. The Assistant Principal of Gilgandra PS was present and involved during this morning session. After lunch a meeting was held at Gilgandra PS that focused on the interview schedule and process for the school community. The Aboriginal Education Assistant and Assistant Principal were present. The primary Principal was most supportive but had prior commitments on the day.

In the initial phase of the research at Crawford PS two meetings were held. The first (Tuesday, May 3) involved the Aboriginal Education Assistant, Principal and Deputy Principal. This was a short meeting to explain the ideas behind the project and to seek support from the school. The second meeting (June 27) was with the school's Aboriginal Advisory Group and School Executive. In this initial phase the focus of the project and key research questions were discussed.

The project focused on investigating “attitudes of teachers (primary and secondary, including School executive) in respect to parent/community (Aboriginal) involvement, issues impacting upon community (Aboriginal) involvement, and the possible ramifications on student engagement (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) in school (primary and secondary)”. The three key research questions were:
1. What are the critical interactions between Aboriginal communities and increased community capacity on positive Aboriginal student engagement with education?
2. What are the critical issues that impact on developing sustainable community capacity projects between schools and Aboriginal people?
3. What activities and processes underpin the development of effective school community capacity projects?

Research sub-questions for each of the five challenges, reviewed in the literature, are presented below. People who have a strategic role in the community capacity building are Aboriginal community, Aboriginal Educational Assistants, Aboriginal students, teachers and school principal. These participants were involved in interviews where these sub-questions formed the basis for discussion in seeking their perspectives on community capacity building.

**Mutual respect for the Aboriginal community**
- What values provide the foundation for the engagement between the school and Aboriginal communities?
- What approaches have been effective in developing mutual respect between the school and Aboriginal communities?
- What approaches have been ineffective in developing mutual respect between the school and Aboriginal communities?

**Mutual engagement with the community in developing learning approaches based upon alternative and creative discourses**
- What insights have been learnt about engaging with Aboriginal communities about learning?
- What have been indicators of effective engagement regarding the learning of Aboriginal students?
- What have been intended outcomes of this engagement regarding learning?
- What have been unintended outcomes of this engagement regarding learning?

**Evidence based discourses to inform one’s understanding of learners and learning**
- What evidence has been used to inform one’s understanding of Aboriginal learners and learning?
- What other forms of evidence could be used to inform one’s understanding of Aboriginal learners and learning?
- What are appropriate and effective ways of using the evidence?
- What are inappropriate and ineffective ways of using the evidence?
**Mutual development of home-school-community alignment for enhancing student learning**

- What roles do each of the following, Aboriginal community, Aboriginal Educational Assistants, Aboriginal students, teachers and school principal, have in developing this home-school-community alignment?
- What roles could each of these have in developing this home-school-community alignment?
- How could each of these groups be supported in their role in developing this alignment?
- What hinders these groups in their role in developing this alignment?

**Personal and collective efficacy for community engagement.**

- How confident are the above people individually in their ability to engage with either the school or Aboriginal community?
- How confident are each of the above as a group in their ability to engage with either the school or Aboriginal community?
- What has contributed to the development of their confidence in their ability to engage with either the school or Aboriginal community?
- What has hindered the development of their confidence in their ability to engage with either the school or Aboriginal community?

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. An initial categorization of the qualitative data was established using a grounded theory approach. Coding was conducted by both authors and identified four constructs linked to the research questions. These constructs formed the Framework for Successful Community Capacity Building.

- **Context** – data related to the physical, social, economic, cultural and historical factors in each site;
- **Engagement and Learning** - data related to levels of involvement of Aboriginal students and community with the schools;
- **Sustainability** – data related to factors influencing the continuity of initiatives established during the Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts project; and
- **Activities and Processes** – data related to the effective interactions that facilitated school/community engagement.
Case Study Report – Crawford

Crawford Public School is situated in the suburb of Doonside in Western Sydney. The school was established in the mid-1970s and in 2005, approximately 140 of the 450 students at Crawford PS are Aboriginal. The main western rail line divides the Doonside community. The Aboriginal population living around Crawford PS is seen to be quite settled. Most of the people in the community are long-term residents, and many of the children at the school are second generation Crawford students.

In 2002/2003, Year 4 teachers volunteered to be involved in the Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts Project. In collaboration with the Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) and the Aboriginal community, mathematics units were developed around a mural theme, use of the local Aboriginal reserve and group-based activities that focused on was building specific mathematical skills such as measuring, numeracy, basic operations and geometry.

Context

Principal

The school community at Crawford is not unusual in its level of transience. “We have anywhere between 30 and 40% transient population each year. We have noticed that the NESB population has gone up from about 20% to 44% over the last few years and they’re far more settled because they buy in and then they stay. But the old housing commission area of Doonside is still very transient. Probably our Aboriginal community is our most settled group.”

While the AEA is very important in the well being of the school / community relationships, there can be a price to pay for the AEA who, unlike many of the other school staff, lives in the community. “Yes, that can cause problems in that there’s a tremendous pressure on AEAs in communities. So that can also cause a lot of heartache. But Daph (the AEA at Crawford) has learned to handle that and say things like ‘Look this is my time, we’ll discuss this at school, come up and see me’. She doesn’t play any favourites. She makes sure that she treats all parents exactly the same, first and foremost as a Department employee and she said that we’ve got to do this fairly for everyone.” “You’ve got to get the right person in the school and it just bridges that gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. She’s there for all the kids in the school, specifically Aboriginal kids but she’s certainly ‘Auntie Daph’ to everyone”.

Students

The students interviewed at Crawford Public School felt that “most of the teachers here are very nice. They’re supportive. They never yell unless someone doesn’t listen and they have to tell them five times. When it’s hot sometimes they yell.” One of these students had recently arrived at the school from North Queensland. He stated that “teachers down here are different to up there.”

The students summed up what it was like to be at Crawford Public School by saying that “it’s a fantastic place to be” although they did ask the interviewers if the Principal could be commanded to remove homework from the requirements of the school.
Aboriginal people

As was suggested by the principal, the Aboriginal community in the Crawford area was seen to be one of the more stable parts of an overall great community. “We can look at the Aboriginal community here in Doonside and lot of us aren’t moving. More are coming but they’re not moving. They’re coming and they’re actually staying. It is a good area to raise your children. Regardless of what the media and everyone else might say, it’s a good area.”

Engagement and Learning

Principal

There were few comments in this category and most of those were around the role of attendance in students’ learning.

“She’ll come and say to me “We have a problem”. And it’s usually a learning issue but it’s attendance related and I’ll say “Look Daph” or she’ll say to me “So and so has been away for too long we need to talk to mum or dad or get them both up”. And we’ve done that successfully as a team together so we get the parent in for an interview. Daph knows that the law is the law and you should have your children at school. And she knows, she’s seen too many kids disappear out of school in Year 8, 9 and 10 who just haven’t done any schooling at all in Kinder or 1st or 2nd because the big issue for us is the parents don’t believe that infants education is vital. They can miss as many days as they like until they get bigger and then they can start going to school. It’s too late then because the kids are turning around saying they’re not going to school.”

Aboriginal people

One of the Aboriginal community members interviewed had overcome a lot of fear about coming into the school because of her own experiences at school and because of some experiences she had with her son at the school. “I just wanted to get my son in to school and get out. Once I got in here I felt as though people were looking and thinking ‘Oh you’re just that naughty boy’s mum’ or whatever. But when I was actually invited to come in and get to know staff and Mr Stuart and people realise that I can talk, I am somebody, I’m not just some kid’s mum, you know. That was a big thing for me to come in here and do something.”

While the Aboriginal community members saw themselves as playing a key role in the education of the children at Crawford Public School, they also saw that they had a role in the education of the teachers. “We educate the teachers in a lot of things, even by just being there, the teachers are being educated by our communications with the kids and even the way we sit and talk and listen to our children. I talk to kids in a way that kids understand. If I don’t approve of what they’re doing I’ll tell them I don’t approve and I walk away, instead of standing over them and screaming. I don’t know, maybe some teachers might learn by seeing that working”.

A significant reason for the success of Crawford Public School in the eyes of the community members interviewed was the group of teachers at the school. “The teachers here are so eager, just wanting to do things all the time. They volunteer all the time, too whether it is sport or whatever it is, they’re all willing to go that bit further and cater for all the kids’ needs. As well, there are Aboriginal perspectives in
all the curriculum areas. The teachers are dedicated. Once they get into the school and community, they’re like us, they feel comfortable. It’s just the Crawford way.”

Another reason was the perceived cultural harmony generated in the school. “There are no colours here even though it’s a massive multi-cultural school. We’re not running around constantly saying ‘Oh no, no, no I’m black, you’re white’, there’s none of that. The kids don’t talk colours and we don’t talk colours. Everyone is the same here and I think that’s what makes the school different and more comfortable than some others.” The community members claimed some credit for this situation because “we treat the kids all equal and they all do the Aboriginal programmes. So it’s so acceptable. It’s just part of their schooling”. As well, they claimed some credit for the ways in which teachers think about Aboriginal people. “I think we’ve opened up a few of the teacher’s eyes too. My niece and nephew are blond haired, brown eyed, white skin. So, the teacher’s idea of Aboriginal is not going to be a dark haired, dark eyed, dark skinned person. We’re all different so I think it’s made them more aware that the Aboriginal culture is alive and well in all different colours.”

The Aboriginal community members interviewed were full of praise for the ways in which they have been accepted by the teachers as valuable additions to the teaching and learning programme. “One teacher has said to me ‘If you want to come in at any time’, she said ‘Come in, just volunteer if you want to do that’. She loves the support that I give her in maths groups and the kids love it too, they look forward to it. Lots of the staff say they love that extra adult company in the classroom and the extra support.” However, with acceptance comes responsibility and the community members felt an obligation and commitment to be regular members of the teaching team.

The central role of Aboriginal history and culture in the teaching and learning at Crawford Primary School was emphasised by the AEA and other community members. “When I look at all these kids I say ‘You’re all from different places and your parents are from all different countries but we’re all living in Australia and we’re all Australian. Now, Aboriginal history is Australian history and we need to share that with everybody. So much has been written about Aboriginal history and culture but everything that all of us here give is not written, it’s not in the history, it’s what we live and who we are and we give that each day. It’s just our way of life, we just share it. Sharing and caring.”

**Sustainability**

**Principal**

The AEA is clearly seen by the Principal to be a critical part of the overall plan for sustainability of the many projects and initiatives undertaken at Crawford PS. “I would think that all schools with a significant number of kids should have an AEA. It’s just so important. It’s an important part of the school.”

The strength of the Crawford AEA is recognised by the Principal as a key reason why so many of the parents are positive about the school. “We’re very fortunate here I suppose because Daph has been here a long, long time that the parents are all very pro-school.”

This positive link with the community has meant that there has been gradually built up quite a large group of supporters and workers for the school. “She’s (the AEA) been very hard-working on getting quite a variety of people to come up to the
school. I don’t think it’s a small group, I think it’s quite a large group but they all come up to the school and they work with her.” “We need to bottle her and put her into other schools!”

These links, in turn have resulted in a very open feeling from the community towards the school with the consequent ease of interaction. “It makes it a lot easier. I mean, I don’t think there’s one parent here who would be frightened to come up and say to me “This is a problem”. Daph has sort of built that confidence up in the parents – ‘Come up here, talk about it’. And so I think they all come up throughout the year and discuss things with me.”

**Students**

When groups of students from Crawford Public School were asked how they would feel if the AEA Auntie Daph was no longer at the school one girl declared that she would be “terrified” because she would feel less supported in the school. “If you have any problems, just go there and she will help you out. She is nice and friendly.”

**Teachers**

When the teachers were asked what they thought would sustain the gains the school had made in their links with the Aboriginal community, the school principal was singled out as an outstanding contributor. When asked to explain, one teacher mused over what would happen if the next principal did not match up to expectations. “If we get somebody in here that’s not tolerant of the culture we’ve created they’ll be getting short shrift. They’ll be out of here quick smart. Because the staff won’t stand for it and the community won’t stand for it.”

On the other hand, the teachers interviewed praised the parent body at the school. “We’ve got some pretty good parents too who put up their hand to become involved in the things in the school like the tutoring programmes that we run in the classrooms. And for the kids to see the adults from their community involved in the school, again, creates for the kids an ownership here, which I haven’t seen in other schools. In other schools Koori adults weren’t encouraged to be on-site and weren’t encouraged to be involved in the classroom. You had the Koori room, or you had the Aboriginal homework centre and that’s as far as they got. And so the kids didn’t have that feeling of belonging. They were just black kids in a white man’s school.”

**Aboriginal people**

While the in-class tutoring helped initiate the involvement of a lot of Aboriginal community members with the school, the Aboriginal people interviewed felt that there were many things that had ensured its longevity. One of these was the strength of the local AECG and its links with the school. Meetings for the local AECG are held at the school and are attended by the principal and a teacher representative, as well as many of the tutors and the AEA. The AECG was seen to be important “because it plays a big role in Aboriginal education, not only with the kids but the community as it seeks Aboriginal perspectives on education and makes sure that the relevant policies are being utilised in the correct manner.”

The openness of the school to having community members visit and work in its programmes also was seen as an important issue in sustaining the progress that has been made. However, as one of the tutors suggests “Aboriginal parents need to be
encouraged a bit more. I know myself, when my son was here at school he had behavioural problems so it was really hard for me to walk in here. I think a lot of the parents suffer that here too. Like I think they need one on one to be told that you’re here and you’re not going to be put down, you’re not going to feel uncomfortable. They need that extra one on one. They need somebody to be able to say “Hey come on, you know how the Aboriginal community works”. They need talk, not a letter that says “Hey come here” because they’re not going to come. You need somebody like Daph or ourselves just get out there and say “Hey, it’s not bad, come here”. While the tutors were well aware of the role that they could play in stimulating other community members to join with them in the school, they were also well aware of how they might be perceived by these community members, “You’re not putting yourself up on a pedestal and we don’t pretend to be anything that we’re not. We’re just ordinary community people, coming in and just doing what, hopefully, is working in supporting the kids. Most of the parents now are more supportive of the people that do come here and get a job.”

This added confidence in the community is then coupled to the openness of the school to produce some remarkable chemistry. “The gate’s never closed. No one is shut out and they know the gates are open. They do make that step to come forward a bit more. They are more open and talk to you. People might come up and have a gripe and you say ‘Look, go and talk to Steve, he’s approachable. Just tell him what your problem is, he’s approachable’. Then, they go ‘Oh yes, so if you can talk to him then we can talk to him’. It is a big thing for Aboriginal parents to come into the school and be able to let their defences down.”

From the perspective of the community members with whom interviews were conducted, the fact that the AEA had been at the school for so long and enjoyed such a high level of respect within the community and the school was of great importance. “Well it’s great for the community because once you start doing chop and change, chop and change, chop and change you’re not going to have any insight to what’s going on within the community and the school is going to be working blind, year in and year out. By having one person set for so long, that person has got the respect of the community and the know how of what is going on.” With second generations of families coming through the school, the fact that the AEA is known by, and knows, the parents has an immediate impact on the children. “Those kids feel comfortable and safe because ‘My mum was here, or my dad was here and they know Auntie Daph and Auntie Daph has been here since then’. So the kids feel like they’re part of me as well. This happens with non-Aboriginal kids too.”

The AEA spent some time explaining what she saw her role being in terms of liaison between the school and the community. “If our kids are going to thrive we need our community members and the only way to get them is to let them know what’s going on and let the school know what’s available out there and who’s available and how to get in touch with the contacts. I’m like a contact person, liaison person and also make sure that the Aboriginal people that are in the school are comfortable. We want them to want to come back and do what they’re good at doing. I just approach people all the time and I love talking and invite them in for a cup of tea or chat. My door’s always open. And I am talking not just the Aboriginal parents. I have lots of non-Aboriginal parents come into my room.”

One clear factor in the Aboriginal community members’ minds that has led to the sustainability of the approach taken at Crawford is the school principal. “Steve Stuart
is the main backbone to it because if he didn’t allow Aboriginal education in the school well then it wouldn’t work. He’s a very understanding man and deserves the credit. He’s a very good principal, I admire him. He’s out there sticking his head into Aboriginal education, so he’s aware and he’s very supportive of it. He’s supportive against racism and he invites everybody in here and just lets them know that racism isn’t an issue at Crawford.”

Another factor is the generational scope of the involvement of Aboriginal community members in the school and the extent to which this has become self-generating. “Our Aboriginal kids are proud of us because they see us as a role model to them as well and it makes our kids want to come to school. It is also a big support for the parents because I mean you’ve got young parents out there too, that have got lots of little kids and they’re too scared to approach the school. Then their kids come home from school talking about having an Aboriginal teacher and the parents think ‘Well, this place musty be alright’. So we are breaking down the barriers.”

**Activities and Processes**

**Students**

A number of the students who were interviewed either had mothers who were currently engaged in the in-class tutoring scheme or who had been so involved. These students were asked how they felt about having their Mums working at the school. Most of them replied that they were ‘shamed’ by the presence of their Mums although the examples they used to explain this feeling varied. For example, “Today she got me a drink in front of my friends” and “Every time she sees me she gives me a hug in front of my friends and I hate it.”

**Teachers**

When they were interviewed, teachers from Crawford Public School indicated three major catalysts to the perceived success that the school has in engaging Aboriginal families and students in the students’ learning. These catalysts are:

- the openness and flexibility of the school;
- the principal; and
- the Aboriginal Education Assistant.

Openness and the establishment of two-way communication was seen as the key advantage of this school over many neighbouring ones that teachers has experienced. “I think it’s just a matter of being open. Having the school seen as transparent so it’s no hidden agendas here, no walls, no blocking out of the community, they’re involved in the decision making process in the school with different things. I think that’s really important for Koori people to feel that they do have ownership of the school. This school has a very positive relationship with the Koori community. Other schools I’ve been at fear inviting the Koori community into the school because they don’t understand the Koori culture, they don’t understand how the Koori people perceive things and react to things, and they think there might be a destabilising influence on a school so they’re not prepared to even entertain that because whatever the status quo is in the school they don’t want to upset that. But here it’s great.”

Along a similar line, another teacher suggested that “I just think that it’s a two way thing at the school. Like if we ever do have any problems with the community,
for example, with an Aboriginal student, the community knows they can come up and there is somebody here they can talk to. Whether it’s Daph or Steve or the staff here, we keep the lines of communication open the whole time.”

Flexibility in meeting the needs of families was also something held dear by some of the teachers interviewed. “I think the big issue too is being flexible with timetables and with meeting people. Everyone here is really flexible.”

While the principal did not feature directly in many of the teacher’s analyses of the situation at Crawford Public School, it was clear that the atmosphere and ethos which he had developed over the years of his tenure were seen to be of great importance to the overall success of the school. It seems, for example, that he is responsible in leading a turn around in both behaviour issues and relationships between the school and the community. An important part of his approach to these relationships and those between children and teachers as well as teachers and teachers is known as ‘the Crawford way’, something that was mentioned by teachers in particular.

Much more of the interview was taken up with praise for the Aboriginal Education Assistant who was obviously much loved and revered. “She’s the one. She’s so easy to approach with any problem that you have and then she will get out there and support her and she supports us, no matter what. She’s brilliant. To so many kids in the school, she’s Auntie Daph and that’s Koori and non-Koori kids. And she treats Koori and non-Koori kids the same and she loves having that familiarity with them and for the kids to see at that age that they are treated the same, by her and by the staff here, they grow up well connected as a community and they don’t look at each other as two different groups.”

One teacher interviewed described the Aboriginal Education Assistant as the Aboriginal mentor, a title of respect, and the title under which the AEA had been introduced to the teacher. She went on to praise the ease with which the AEA works with teachers: “She is the kind of person that you could just walk up to and say ‘Look I need something, I need some help on this area’ and straight away she’ll lend a hand. I can go to her and ask her for help and support and she’s always there to do it.”

When asked what they thought the principal valued in the Aboriginal Education Assistant, the teachers listed the following: “I’m sure it’s her personality. Her approachability. Her passion for all the children in the school. Her knowledge of the Koori community. The way that she conducts herself within the school. But, she’s not afraid to come and ask a question if she doesn’t know something. She won’t go off and do something half-knowing what she’s doing and make a mess. Yes, she’s a real great link between ourselves and the community.” They went on to suggest that the close working link between the principal and the AEA was a critical issue in the successes achieved by the school. “The other principals that I’ve worked under didn’t have as close a relationship with their AEAs and didn’t value the AEA as a member of staff as much as he does.”

The in-class tutoring program has been very important not only in terms of the academic benefits it has brought to the students involved but also in terms of the engagement of the community with the school. As many as 12 tutors were employed by the school in this program and this established a core group who provided role models for other community members to be involved in the school. “They got over their fear, because all of a sudden they were learning things that they hadn’t picked up on high school and they thought ‘This is easier than I thought’. Those fears just
started to go away and they just felt more comfortable coming in then. It was just made really easy for them and were made to feel welcome as they came in. Like we used to have afternoon teas, morning teas and such things. Daph was a big part of that because she did know a lot of them.”

**Aboriginal people**

The Aboriginal people interviewed, including the AEA and some of the in-class tutors felt that the tutoring system that had been instituted within the school was not only important for the children involved but also helps bring Aboriginal people closer together and closer to the school. “What we aim to do with the tutoring system here is put our Aboriginal students on an even academic level with the non-Aboriginal children or even our other Aboriginal children that don’t need that extra help. We try to be supportive of the school, the teacher and each other. We get a lot from each other, we don’t just go in off our own bats, we ask each other different questions so if we have trouble with one child, doesn’t matter who it is, we can refer to another tutor and get some help.” While the tutoring program has not been funded as generously in the last couple of years as it was in the beginning, there was still a legacy to be seen in terms of the ways in which the community members were involved. “We were able to run the programme that was four days a week, from 9.30 to 1.15. And we were able to have twelve tutors then and we had a co-ordinator as well, one of the teachers. It was to do with literacy first off and then it ended up extending into literacy and numeracy. The numeracy came in when we had the *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* programme in Stage 2. We had three of those teachers and all the ASSPA Committee on the programme as well just to help set it up.” Crawford has had a history of parental involvement in reading programmes such as Reading Recovery but it was the paid in-class tutoring programme in literacy and numeracy that really stimulated ongoing involvement of the community.
Case Study Report – Gilgandra

Gilgandra is a small rural community in western New South Wales, about 400 kilometres from Sydney. Gilgandra is a harmonious community of about 3000 people, approximately one-third of whom are Aboriginal. Almost one in two pupils at the state primary school and one in five of the state high school’s students is Indigenous. Most of the people in the community are long-term residents, there is little overt racism and, according to one of the Aboriginal community members, “the non-Aboriginal and the Koori (Aboriginal) people all mix well together”.

Nominally, a key focus of the Mathematics in Indigenous Context Project was building specific mathematical skills in which a number of Aboriginal students could enhance their learning of measuring, mapping, enlarging, estimating, using compasses, and understanding volume and fractions. The students completed in-class mathematics activities and mapped changes in land use near the school with the help of a local community member and described directions using compasses. Following these activities, the students were part of an excursion to ‘The Pines’, an area where the Gilgandra Aboriginal community lived from the 1950s to the mid-1970s. There, they were given a traditional welcome by Aboriginal elders and told personal accounts of the lives of family and tribe before carrying out a series of mathematics activities (Handmer, 2005). Aspects of the influence and impact of the collaborative curriculum development on enhanced community capacity are reported.

Context

Aboriginal Community People

Gilgandra is seen to have a different type of environment to other towns. “This community has always been different. Like the non-Aboriginal people and the Koori people are all mixed. When you go to another town where I come from and there’s a lot of racism and all that type of stuff. But here, I mean I’ve lived here for 35-36 years, and it’s a completely different community to that community I’ve come from. And the white people are different here to the other town.” Another thought there had always been a lot of Christianity in the town. In the area used for the project, The Pines, “White people used to live with the Aboriginal people over the old Pines. I think it’s because of, like you said, Christianity because there was a lot of sharing everything. In The Pines there never seemed to be without anything and everyone seemed to be happy. Everybody shared and everybody was a part of everybody else’s life.”

The Aboriginal people commented that the difference appeared to be in the parents getting out. “The parents are, like you say, they’re given the responsibility, they’re taking that responsibility to try and make that improvement in the community …to get on and to work with non-Aboriginal people. And the kids can see what their parents are doing. And it just opens it up. The next generation of kids, because mum and dad have already done it and then pop’s already done it, that’s just becomes a way of life for our kids and our grandkids. You might get the odd bit of racism here and there but overall not much. You’re still faced with it but it’s not as bad in the school here as it is in other places.”
One person commented on Coonabarabran where they had a mission. “We were kept by the mission, they lived on a mission. I didn’t even speak to white people when I came here. When I left Coonabarabran it was only coming here but this town itself is so different.”

Working with the school teachers is really up to the individual person. “If you want to get up and join in, they’ll join in. They’ll talk to you. If you want to talk, they’ll talk. If you sit back I think most of it is that they’re as scared as what you are when they first come in. If you sit back and you’re scared to talk. They’re scared to talk to you because they’re frightened “Well if I speak to her, will she speak to us?” I’ve found that most of the time, yeah, people will talk to you. It’s just you yourself as an individual person, how you feel about that person over there. If you want to mix in, get in and they’ll accept you.”

Working with teachers and overcoming fear is a feeling all people have when they enter unknown territory. “There’s an exchange of knowledge there when you’re getting Aboriginal people that come into schools. Ok, they’re not very well educated but they know a lot about how Aboriginal people live. And the teachers can see how they relate to the kids and the kids relate to them and you’re learning off each other all the time. And like Tanya said, that wall you put up, it’s not really there. You put it up and it’s just like you’re going into unknown territory, you don’t know. So I mean, it doesn’t matter where you go or what you do in life, if you don’t know there’s always going to be a little bit of fear there. And it’s just overcoming that fear I think.”

Often the history of personal backgrounds influences how comfortable Aboriginal people feel. “I think it comes from, as I said, there’s a number of factors involved and one of them is, and it’s our parents who were excluded, weren’t allowed to go to school because of the racism. The parents of kids at school today have actually been involved in all that stuff that went on before and it’s very hard to get their involvement. But I mean, projects like Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts are where their knowledge is seen to be valued and schools are going out of their way to involve them, to ask them in, encourage them in, and is opening the door really. For better things.”

“I think with the programmes, because you’re getting out, the kids are getting out, the teachers are getting out. The parents are becoming involved and getting out. So they’re all learning more about their community-. I think that’s why it actually goes from the school into the community because it’s a really a big involvement. It’s not just the students and the teachers. And it’s not just us putting things out there either, because the teachers are actually putting things out there.”

As a result of the project, the teachers are more “aware of things affecting Aboriginal kids and they’re more inclined, they don’t want to offend with things and they often ask ‘Is that the right thing to say?’ or ‘Is that the right thing to do?’ I noticed with a few teachers now they’re asking, ‘That won’t offend anyone if I do this’ or ‘Should I do it this way?’ So the tables are sort of turning now. Whereas before it was they didn’t worry if it offended or not, now they’re asking ‘I hope I’m saying the right thing’. ‘I hope it’s not offensive to anyone.’ I know that comes from the fact that our history is now being taught in school. Our culture is finally being given the respect that it deserves. And that’s a change in the relationships between people. Now they’ve realised that Australia does have a black history whereas before all it had was a white history.”
There have been a number of changes since the Aboriginal Education Review. “The ASSPA Committee has been abolished, or the ASSPA organisation has been abolished. They’ve now brought in the Parent School Partnership Programme and parents have to be a part of what is in the programmes, or what is going to happen in the schools. So we’ve formed a committee and parents have been involved and had their say in what they would like to see happen. So it is, it is happening. But now I think it’s been recognised that an education is important for our kids, that it’s actually the key for Aboriginal people. Education.”

The role of the AECG was important for the schools in Gilgandra. “We had a really good AECG here, like within the school. It’s only been gone out for about a year now. That was one of the things that combined with the school, because we had the principals from the schools and they met monthly, had the community in.”

**Primary Aboriginal Students**

Gilgandra primary Aboriginal students stated that, “it’s good living in Gilgandra because it’s such a small town and everybody gets on with each other. Yeah, there are not many people here so you’re normally friends with everybody and you know everybody.” They enjoyed it when you go away for sport because “you meet new people there …and they might know your friends or something like that.” They felt that “there’s lots of facilities and stuff set up just for kids such as motorbike tracks.” They were proud of the history of Gilgandra “because that’s where the Coo-ee March started” and there is the Cooee Festival, The Windmills and the Aboriginal paintings. Gilgandra, on the Castlereagh River, in Aboriginal means ‘Long Waterhole’ “because that’s where all the Aborigines used to meet, because there was water.”

Gilgandra has “such a good working place and it’s got good shops, hospital and schools, for a rural town.” It is a “quiet and clean town…where everyone cares for you and everything. Like the person at the pool, you go in and he knows your name and he’ll say hello and if it starts to rain and the pool shuts he’ll take you back to his place and ring up your parents.”

The students indicated that, “everybody in the town respects each other even if they’ve got a different culture or a different colour you know they respect each other.” They see “our mums, dads and teachers” teaching them about respect for one another. The teachers teach us to respect people and what they are, not the way they look or the way they dress.” Parents say “be nice to other people because you wouldn’t like it if they teased you. Don’t say anything unless it’s nice. They set an example because what they do, you do.”

The students spoke about the importance of role models in Gilgandra because “otherwise we’d have a muck-up of a life. It’d be chaos.” They easily identified people who helped them including, “My Nan, because since I was a little kid she’s been teaching me things. She’s just building stuff up in my brain.” “My Pop because down at his garage and he teaches me things about the cars and that and which sticks in my mind so if I ever need it, I can use it.” “My sister because she just tells me things if I’m wrong and she’ll say that I’m wrong and she tells me stuff that I would need in life.” “My two older brothers because they’ve already been through school and they help me in what not to do during school and they just help me with my homework and questions I don’t know about. The just help me along.” “My Nan because she told me that I should wear a helmet and so I started wearing a helmet.
and then not long after that I fell off my bike and cracked my sternum and the doctor said if I hadn’t been wearing a helmet I could have done damage to my brain.”

They liked Gilgandra Public School because “the teachers are understanding. They help you out in all places kind of thing. They kind of know what you’re trying to say. They look out for you and stuff.” “There are good resources and there’s stuff for everybody, like we’ve got a Special Ed unit so that everybody can come. There’s the canteen, because if you’ve got no lunch and you’ve got money they’ll cook you up something real quick.” When they are upset they know that other children “come and help you out and make sure that you’re alright.” They “like all the trees so if you don’t have your hat you can just sit under a tree and talk. Or the books that they have in here, they’re pretty good because you can read and you can take them home so you can learn about more things at home.” They liked having all the sport equipment and the new computers. “The old ones, they didn’t load fast and they got the new ones in and they load heaps quicker.”

They did not think it was hard being Aboriginal in Gilgandra because “they still get the same education as the non-Aboriginals and …we’re all the same person and we all get equal attention. I don’t know why it’d be hard. You still get the same education, you get the same respect. We’re all human beings. We all get the same.”

**Secondary Aboriginal Students**

The secondary Aboriginal students thought the high school was “pretty good. I don’t know anything different but it’s pretty good. Yeah, I suppose we’re lucky that we come to this school. Well I’ve been to a couple of schools and the environment that we’re in is just a better environment. The teachers are friendly with us. You’ve got mates that are friendly. It’s just all around good.” The teachers are friendly being “willing to help if we need help. Any subject, any teacher, they’re just always there to help and lend a hand, with anything.” It’s good to have “someone that can help you when you need it in class work and stuff. It’s good having the AEA here as well.” The AEAs “can understand you and from our point of view other than like the white and black.” There is a difference in thinking “because most black people, they don’t really like coming to school and learning and stuff. And most white teachers and stuff don’t really try to bond with them and start helping out at most schools. But here they just treat you really different and you get along.” In other schools sometimes you just “didn’t get much encouragement from either the teachers or anything. They were quite bigger schools.” The teachers at Gilgandra “encourage you to try and do the best you can.”

In Gilgandra “everyone knows your face, kind of thing, because it’s only a small town. It’s like everyone knows each other. I reckon it’s a good thing. It’s good to know everyone, you don’t feel like it’s people you don’t know, it’s like a friendly environment because you know everyone.”

Gilgandra High School has “a good reputation around the district because of academic and sporting.” They thought it was a good school because “you know everybody’s face around the school and everyone talks, since it’s a small school. There are groups but everyone still talks so it doesn’t really leave anyone out. Yes, everyone gets along. Well basically because you’ve got everything here, everything you want and you come here to have a good time and stuff and spend time with your friends. It’s like everyone is open and they really want to sit down and listen to you. We’ve got good teachers like Mr Lloyd and stuff like that, he’s like a younger teacher
and we can sit down and have yarns with him and stuff like that. He helps us with …
you go up to the homework centres on Mondays and stuff. He’s a good bloke. I can
talk to him anytime. He’s cool.” In this school “everyone is treated equally. No matter
who you are you have the same opportunity to succeed in whatever you want to
succeed in. I like the ovals and the whole set up of the school. The appearance and
how it’s kept, that’s pretty good. Serenity!”

One Aboriginal student finds being Aboriginal in Gilgandra “pretty good because
I get treated as equally as anyone else because people respect me for who I am and I
just take them for who they are. We just get along, we’re all treated equally. We all
just come together. We’ve got a pretty even amount of Aboriginal and non-
Aboriginals within our community and both sides accept each other for who they are.
They treat each other how they’d like to be treated. So if the Aboriginal community
treated the white community with respect well then they’ll get the same response
back. You do get the people that do say racist stuff and they’re everywhere, but pretty
much everyone is treated fairly.”

Teachers and Aboriginal Educators

One AEA reported that, in the beginning of the project, the Aboriginal elders said
“they prefer us to just look to the future. But they didn’t realise that passing the
knowledge they had was valuable to us. I just find it fascinating, the problems that
existed then and how they dealt with things. Non-Aboriginal people have their
history. It sort of would have stopped there for us if she didn’t pass that information
on. So to me, it sort of doesn’t complete you as a person unless you know about your
history and your family’s history and stuff. You have to acknowledge the past and
what went on in the past before you can move on.”

This acknowledgement is important for not doing so “that’s the greatest problem
with probably both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people, that they don’t recognise
that the past is knowledge. It’s part of their future, part of their generation and how it
affects the next generation. We need to know where we come from and how we lived,
and that, because if we don’t know those things as we go along, we’ve sort of like lost
it. You’ve lost it, and all of it will be lost. That’s from even both sides, the non
Aboriginal. If you don’t keep the knowledge up and keep that knowledge, and pass it
on, it’ll be lost. And somewhere along, just human nature, there’s always something
there that’s missing. You don’t know what but you’re trying to look for what’s
missing. And especially in regards to who were your family and who were their kids
and who were you related to and stuff.” This background is a key principle of the
involvement of Aboriginal people in the project and its relevance to the community.

It is almost a duty for Aboriginal people to pass on their knowledge because that
is “the reason why our language is lost because they thought it was evil to speak our
language. That’s why we lost our language and now it’s hard to get back because still
even some of the Elders around are still not agreeing with it, that sort of thing. So that
makes it harder for us to get our language back into the school.”

Even now “they don’t want it back because of some reason or another. Some
think that it’s evil. All I know is some of them think it’s not right, not proper and that.
But I reckon we’re having something that belongs to us, every nationality has got a
language. We’ve got our language so we still need to keep it. If we don’t keep these
things and we lose it … that’s why most of our people that are running around and
they don’t know where they are. It’s like they’ve got no incentive to go on. They’ve
got nothing. They’re not proud, there’s nothing to be proud of. They don’t think they’re worth anything. That’s how they make me think, anyhow. I don’t know about anyone else. That’s my point of view. I just think that the things that are passed down, like that knowledge and the way people behaved and the way they acted are part of us. So you know from your grandma some traits that you carried on and things that you do and that’s important stuff. Whereas if those things aren’t told you think, “Well, where did I get this from?” So you don’t sort of know stuff. So that’s why I’m like I am because my mother or my grandmother, my great-grandmother was like that, that was the type of person they were, and that was because of these things that they did that made them that person. And they’ve passed all these characteristics on to me. That’s part of your identity, is the language. It’s part of your identity.”

There was considerable discussion about the interrelatedness of *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* and its impact on the community. Henry (Primary AEA) thought it “was really great, because part of our education of the way we lived and that, part of our background and history and that was being brought up. And even when I was out there and I was talking and I was there, to me, personally how I felt when I looked there, when I went out there and I seen it and was talking to the kids and that, I could see myself there. You know, like doing the things I used to do and I could see the other kids. You just sort of went back in time, I don’t know, it felt really good. Kids they listened when I talked about wearing no shoes and those things. How I did it. At times I don’t know how I did it but I did. Today I wouldn’t be able to do it.”

In talking about the project Tanya said she “was sort of looking more along the lines of the kids and how, especially the non-Aboriginal kids, would react and how they would feel about learning about Aboriginal ways of life and stuff. They had their reactions to things and even our kids, and did they feel comfortable or did they feel embarrassed. I just think I wonder how they’ll go, I wonder if they’ll say anything that will … “Oh that’s a lot of crap” or something like that and offend the Aboriginal kid. Or how will they all react together when these stories are being told. But it was really good.”

For Harry (Head Teacher, Mathematics), the culminating day of the project evidenced “a sense of achievement in that we had got so far from where we had set off. I know it was a maths unit that we were asked to do, but then we decided ourselves that there was far more importance on the fact that we should acknowledge, appreciate and know about the Aboriginal people out in that area. Going out there and seeing, the interaction of the children, seeing the Aboriginal children take an ownership role once we got there, of their little groups. As a staff member, watching the interaction between all the kids, in that they’ve all learnt something about the identity of the Aboriginal people who lived there. For a lot of the non-indigenous kids there was an area that you drove past and thought “Oh, so what?” But now it means something. I just hope that in the future that we’ve started down this road, and I’ll always call it a journey just begun because that’s what we’ve started, we’ve only just got into second gear. We need to do far more to acknowledge that part of our history.”

Harry felt that it was now important for the “school community, as a community itself (to acknowledge the past). I’m a bit like Henry, he was talking about the language and I was thinking back to having parents who came here as migrants and I was born here, that they were actively discouraged by people in Gil, the white community, of sticking to their Dutch culture. As far as like, if they spoke Dutch outside, my Mum used to say people would sort of frown on this and say “Well can’t
you speak English?” And I think in the community, it wasn’t encouraged for the Aborigines to speak their language but it was encouraged for other people to hold on to their identity. And I think in this life, if you don’t know where you came from and have an identity you flounder the rest of your life. You’re wondering. Yes, you’re always wondering.”

The mathematics project enabled part of the Aboriginal history of Gilgandra to come to the surface. For Harry, the mathematics project was “a good learning experience for both of them (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students). It was an excellent learning experience for the staff. Not only the people involved but the reaction that went through the whole school community. We had ventured out, we had done it.

The role of the school AEA has evolved over time. As an AEA Mary has “found it’s gotten easier, my role, in the school. I’ve been here eight years now. When I first came in here there were barriers. And I think also too, the other staff didn’t know my role. But now they’ve become more aware of our role and more receptive of it. And it’s gotten a lot easier the last couple of years. I was a loner, I was just one, now there’s more of us, I’ve got more support people now. I think the other staff now they know what we’re here for, what we’re all about, what we’re on about and now we’re more accepted. There has been a cultural change hasn’t there, within teaching.”

Harry agreed saying that the AEAs role used to be “virtually teachers would say “You’re a naughty little boy” so people would go and spend their time with them. And they weren’t part of the learning team. They were part of this behaviour ‘Let’s fix this kid, in this little slot here’. Whereas now they are all part of this learning team. So that has been a cultural change. But in a lot of schools it’s getting established older staff members to realise that there has to be this change. Yes, send the child to have a little talk to Mary if there is a problem, but remember that Mary is not wholly and solely there as the disciplinarian.” The change has “got to be continual all the time. It’s got to be kept at all the time, you’ve got to work on it all the time.”

The AEAs acknowledged that they have “to involve the parents in the child’s learning. We have to have their support. But there needs to be stronger links between school and parents. The parent/school partnership, that has to be something that we really need to do because there’s still that reluctance.”

This issue of reluctance was explained as “when I was going to school whenever Aboriginal issues were being brought up in the classroom you’d have a feeling and like you were being backed into a corner or things were being said. We didn’t have that knowledge coming from community into the school then. But it’s changed over the years and the AEA’s role has been very important in getting that knowledge into the school with the whole school community feeling comfortable talking about Aboriginal issues and Aboriginal ways of life. Then the non-Aboriginal kids and teachers are becoming more comfortable talking. Bringing all this stuff to the surface makes you feel more comfortable within the classroom. Whereas you didn’t feel that before. And then you’re learning improves because you’re more comfortable with yourself and you’re not scared of things cropping up. You’re willing to talk about stuff. Whereas before when we were in the school with things like that, you got a bit “Oh dear, I’m going to be slammed here”. So it was hard. But now, all that’s coming in and just interaction with people in the schools and the AEA getting out and the maths teachers, all your teachers just getting together and doing stuff makes it a lot
easier on the students. It still happens a little bit, not as much as it used to, people are more comfortable. I feel more comfortable.”

The truth was that in the past “as an Aboriginal person you often felt degraded and stuff and you didn’t know the answer for it. You felt like you were defending stuff all the time. But now when you walk into a classroom it’s sort of shifted and you see the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids having discussions on stuff. They’re not rows, it’s all positive discussion about stuff and no one is scared anymore to put their hand up and say ‘This is what I think.’”

Harry was a local to Gilgandra so he “grew up with Aboriginal people. I knew a lot about the Aboriginal community because I used to live very close to where The Pines was but I’ve learnt that probably we need to be aware that what we perceive as normality in life is not always what our indigenous children have. Now even though I knew that, I’ve become more aware after talking to some of the people involved in the project.”

For Leanne (Primary School AP), also a local in Gilgandra, the project “was a history lesson for me, really. I found that was really interesting. Being a primary teacher we’re quite aware of the different learning styles of kids and how visual things and hands-on things work but it reminds you again and it makes you do it again, with the kids. From doing it, you can see the positive-ness in it, and the kids and their confidence grow. Because we had so many community people up there that day, six of them, the Aboriginal kids were really, really proud. You could see it in the way they stood and walked and talked. The ones that would normally be a little bit quieter and shyer were up front a lot more and, you know, “This is great”, really proud. And I thought it was really good. So you can see, that was using the community that brought out the better part. I shouldn’t say the better part, but made them stronger which was fine. You don’t see that come out in school, they kind of go back into their shell a little bit almost. And I also think it’s the recognition of children to Aboriginality.”

Leanne thought this project was great “because the kids were so positive about it all and then the community members were very positive. Often I think a lot of the community members are very reluctant to come and talk and if they do it’s usually only if there is an issue of some sort. They come in because there is something wrong, they’re not happy about something or to find out what is going on or whatever. This was a different sort of day. This was a real relaxed sort of day. It was for a positive thing, a plus thing, a school thing and a learning thing. They could play an important role. And I think it made even the adults feel worthwhile. They’ve got something valuable they can do. And they saw us as humans, other human beings, not ‘the teacher’. We were just part of it. Everyone was comfortable.”

Harry spoke of the role of a learning team in that “I think everyone in the community should just see us as part of a learning team. Yes, we are assigned to look after a certain class so we have the direction in that, it’s mandated where things have to go. But I think the community needs to see that we are part of the learning team for everybody. That day was almost like that. We all had our own parts to play, didn’t we? If we didn’t do our little job, it wasn’t going to work, was it? The whole thing wouldn’t have worked and we were all on par, our little jobs, whatever we were doing.”
Principal and Head Teacher Mathematics

In being honest about the community Peter (Secondary School Principal) said that “we’ve actually had some volatile community stuff go on which has tested the waters a bit and so we’ve actually had a situation where we’ve had some families out of sorts with each other and they’ve actually been Aboriginal families with girls in conflict and those involved police and an AVO. We’ve had families who have been in here and have been angry and then the next day they’re back and they’re talking to us and helping us work through things. We’ve had three or four boys who are around 15 or so who have been socially spending time with some slightly older boys and involved in illicit drug use. Yet the families are still in a close working relationship with us. I’ve been elsewhere where there’s a breakdown in that relationship and it never comes back.” There are issues of domestic violence within the community and “behaviour in terms of being a bit at risk of causing grief to themself and others.”

The Principal believed “that there’s a relationship statistically between the longer you’ve been here the more evident they can be and so you can actually have people on staff who will make all the right sort of noises and in the subtle way in which they conduct themselves in this community it strengthens relationships.”

Engagement and Learning

Aboriginal Community People

The Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts project has been “very successful because of the involvement of the Aboriginal people. They’ve taken on ownership and they’re very supportive.”

There is so much offered to children today. As one Aboriginal person commented, “I left school when I was in Yr 8. So we’ve had to learn and teach ourselves what we know today. But there’s so much more out there for the kids today that it’s unreal. And all you can do is just encourage them and keep encouraging them to come to school and let them know that the education is best because without an education today in society you’re not going to survive. You’ve got to keep reminding them that education is so important for us, for everyone. Without that then you’re not going to have anything. There’s no future for anyone because to get a job today you’ve got to have papers to say that you can do the job. Doesn’t matter if it’s labouring or just to dig a hole in the ground, you’ve got to have papers to say that you can do that.”

The community members began to talk of the ways in which you engage with Aboriginal people. “You gradually work on it. You never front people and say you’ve got to be doing this. I think a lot of it is their ignorance of Aboriginal culture. They’ve got a set way and it’s not that they don’t …when you say ‘ignorant’ they may not be ignorant but when you look at it, that’s what it is. And when they start to know and learn how important it is to do it a certain way and you’ll get more response from your kids. ‘We have to educate them’ to what we’re made of, what we are and where we’ve come from …and opening their eyes that theirs, while it’s a good way, it’s not the only way to do things.

Teachers have been taught one way and “that’s what I was trying to get at, they’ve been taught one way and they’re not looking at any other ways. In learning you’ve got lots of bends. There’s lots of turns. There’s lots of different ways. You’ve got to cater for everyone individually. You’ve got to learn to be able to bend, to give and to hang
on and things like that. If you don’t know how to do that then you’re not going to be a good teacher, that’s with anything.

What we’ve got to realise that when you’re teaching, you teach from a book and you’ve got no experience then you don’t understand it. Unless you experience it also, don’t have the experience in it and then you fully don’t understand what you’ve learnt.”

The Aboriginal people stated that through this project the teachers “got to realise that Koori kids are different. We are different. And the teaching styles are different. And they have to adapt to the way that we learn and that’s the way we have done it. I know it is changing. I remember when I first started here there wasn’t anything much. Then we started on the maths project. Then we started on the Aboriginal health studies project. And since then, just over the years, it’s sort of had a ripple effect. You see it going into the English department and the English Head Teacher is coming and saying ‘Can you come and sit in this meeting because we’re discussing the syllabus and what the kids are learning.’ So they were asking for our advice and ‘How would you go about this and how would you teach the unit?’ So it’s sort of going into all KLAs. (Slowly it’s getting out there). It is. It’s just been really slow. So they’re realising the importance of it and the value of knowledge. But they’re now looking for ways or strategies to teach the Koori kids.”

In describing the learning benefits of the project they reported that “to see that programme running last year was excellent. I mean, to have the kids out there. There was 80 kids at Balladoran doing this programme and like most of us were involved and to see them learning at their own pace, out in the open, free and just learning at their own pace. And not being put under a lot of pressure as being in a classroom made a big difference to the kids. Oh yeah, there was a real buzz in the community about it, yeah. But I think not only the Koori kids, they benefited. I think the non-Aboriginal kids benefit too.”

They believed that “the change is coming. It has been gradual but yeah, I think now there’s a bigger focus on it whereas before it was ignored. And I think getting people into the school to talk to the teachers and stuff. I know we’ve had a bit of trouble with kids and the way Aboriginal kids speak, and all the lingo. Yeah, bringing in that person to raise the teacher’s awareness is helpful. Well it wasn’t recognised but now it is being recognised and valued and that’s making the students feel more a part of the school. It’s that awareness that’s changed in non-Aboriginal people and leads to other changes. I reckon it’s making the kids more aware of their education and the need for education.”

**Secondary Aboriginal Students**

One student said she liked the school “because you can get a good education from it. The teachers help you out and they give you ideas.” This is important because if “you want to get a real good job in the future you have to go to school and learn. If you don’t understand stuff you just ask the teachers.” You have to enjoy school because “if you don’t enjoy coming here, you’re not motivated.” One student set his own goals “and want to achieve them, do what I need to do.”

The teachers are friendly. You “don’t get on the bad side of the teachers, just stay on the good side and you’re right. They’re willing to teach you as long as you’re willing to learn. If you’re not at school to learn they’re not going to push you to learn if you don’t really want to. Yeah, like they’ve got to feel like this boy or girl doesn’t
really want me to be here. But when they do want to like get in and have a go at it, they get the feeling that these boys or girls get in and have a go so we may as well keep trying to help them out through the years and stuff.”

**Teachers and Aboriginal Educators**

*Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* has helped Gilgandra community in many ways. “It involved the school and the community together coming to know that we are one. We are one community, there’s no separation in that community. Got to know our kids, the way they learn too. Especially, the Education Department has learnt that all kids don’t learn the same and some kids are hands-on. They’ve got to see things then they’ve got to do it and that’s the way you get more response from them that way.”

Involvement in the project made Leanne “aware of the children’s learning, the way they are learning and through involving community, more of the hands-on not just the norm type teaching.”

**Principal and Head Teacher Mathematics**

Peter believed that for some of the teachers there are “the frustrations that we have is still trying to fit kids into the pattern of a curriculum.”

The Head Teacher, Mathematics had been at the school since 1981. He had seen teachers “who are the most excellent practitioners you could ever have in a classroom but because of their attitude to indigenous children whatever value they are as a teacher or an educator in this community is zero, because those children can’t relate to them. They go home and say something to mum and dad, or an aunt and uncle, because they’re network of communication is far more efficient than ours. Once they judge you as being totally ineffective, the road to get back into being effective, I think, is nearly impossible.”

There are issues of the competencies of a practitioner, the attitudinal values and the actions of the teacher. The Head Teacher gave some examples of inappropriate ways to engage. “Once there were teachers always dropping into schools. They used to call themselves the NIDA of the West, the acting school, because there was always someone coming. They gave brilliant lessons but they couldn’t relate to the students. We used to, for instance when we were celebrating NAIDOC Week. We’d have it the last day of the term, which falls in the last week of term, so the non-Aboriginal kids, would vote with their feet and stay home. And so it was, in terms of the impact on it, there might be 3 plus points and 54 minus points in terms of the compounding impact of what we were doing in the community. We then built things through the week. Then we used to also, basically, give every Aboriginal student a prize sort of thing. That was not good for the non-Aboriginal kids. What we do now is celebrate a community/student leadership, social justice and community involvement in making the school a better and fairer place for Aboriginal kids and non-Aboriginal kids.”

**Sustainability**

**Aboriginal Community People**

Leadership and the role of the Principal were reported as critical elements by the Aboriginal community members. “We had a really, really good principal. And I think
from there onward it started to change. Good teachers and good staff make a
difference.’ They focused on the current Principal and his impact. ‘Our principal that
we’ve got now, you’d get a fight from a few parents if they try to get him away from
here. I said to my kids, you’re so blessed to be here in this school, to have the
opportunity to go to the school. I reckon it’s one of the best schools in New South
Wales. Mr Whalan first came when I had my daughter here. The support that he
offered to give her and still does now goes sometimes above and beyond just
education and goes more into friendship, becomes friends, going to dinner together,
having a few beers together and that’s how it becomes a community. The commitment
of the school and the Principal goes above and beyond the call of duty. With the right
people they can see what’s needed, they work to get those things done.”

Commitment, explaining and timing were also seen to be critical elements in
facilitating change. “I think it’s the ones who are involved in it, is committed to it and
really they know the importance of it getting out, being taught. The people involved in
it from the beginning got to be committed and they’ve got to then be committed to go
out and first be here with their elders and with the community and that and not give
up on them. So you go back there now and you find another way of doing it, it may
work. But you’ve got to keep at it …it’s just explaining yourself more. Sometimes it
might be because of that, because we haven’t explained ourselves enough or things
like that. So I think if they don’t understand what they’re getting into well they’re not
going to have a go. And every parent wants what’s best for their child. You’ve got to
catch them at the right time. Things are going on in their lives where it’s impossible
for them to be able to do things. So if you get them at that right time, you’re right.
Sometimes you just can’t so you just have to just, as you say, keep going back. And
you don’t try to push it on them, you explain it to them and if they don’t understand it,
if you haven’t explained it properly then you will go back and you’ll think about it
and go back again…you got to have compassion.

“It’s all timing.” For one Aboriginal person, this project and talk has “made me
realise what was actually going on in here over the last twenty, thirty years. And see
how far we have come today. It’s made me open my eyes, I never sort of thought
about it before but it’s made me realise just how much there’s been a change. It’s a lot
of commitment from a lot of people. (Yes that’s right). And a lot of different people
have come and gone.”

Secondary Aboriginal Students

It was important to have role models particularly “for people who don’t really
enjoy being at school and stuff. So their role model can actually tell them to go
through school and normally they listen to their role model, rather than listen to
anybody else.”

Teachers and Aboriginal Educators

For Harry Tanya, as an AEA, was a key person in reducing the level of risk in the
project because “she knew which cogs to turn. You had inside knowledge.” One
strength of the project is not necessarily just the mathematics content but rather the
coming together of the knowledges of Gilgandra community. The teachers and the
AEAs have different sets of knowledges about the community. “We all know about
those circles you travel in. Like I’ve known certain things about non-Aboriginal
community but I’d know the majority of stuff about the Aboriginal community because a lot of us are related and we know what goes on. We’re more open to speak to each other and let each other know what is going on than I would be with a non-Aboriginal person. They’ll be more hesitant to tell me things whereas in our own community it’s quite free and open isn’t it? Whereas if Harry or Leanne (teachers) was to go and ask something, it’d be “Everything is Ok”.

For the non-Aboriginal people “we ask things more in a directive sort of way. Aboriginal people do it in more of a congregational way. The way we are going in a round-about way and you’ll put on the kettle and we’ll have a cuppa. We’re yarning about it. Yes, that’s what’s happened today.”

Harry provided a way of explaining these different circles of community knowledge. “If we consider ourselves like a Venn diagram, remember Venn diagrams? We’re getting that common bit bigger and bigger. Because what they tell us we’re able to build on in our relationships with the kids.”

For Harry, it is so important that “if you believe in something then if you keep focussed and keep going and it doesn’t matter how you might have a blockage here but you just keep plugging at it. It is important that Aboriginal knowledge be accepted and valued in schools for if not we’re going to keep having that gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids in literacy and numeracy and so on.” The AEA’s agreed wholeheartedly.

Principal and Head Teacher Mathematics

The Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts project at Gilgandra High School “opened the door with mums and dads coming up and realising that it’s not a threatening environment. But we need to keep working at it. We know that.” In presenting at conferences the learning team “came to the conclusion that we had done a lot more than a lot of people.” When Gilgandra undertook the Mathematics in Indigenous Context they did it “in isolation and when we’ve gone out now and talked to other schools and showing them, the fact that other people say how wonderful it is. We thought we did a wonderful job within our own little sphere, but now we realise that yes, we are ahead of other places. The other day they said to us “Can we have a copy of this and all this”. Mary said “Yes” and they said “Are you sure because some schools don’t like sharing”. And we all said “Why?”

It is so important, “just sharing the ownership of the curriculum and yet we’ve certainly got a structured leadership.”

Building up trust between staff, between kids and staff, between community and school is critical. Peter commented that “I don’t think you can fudge it. And I’ve learnt that there are people on the Executive, there are people who actually have this genuine gut kind of sense of social justice and empathy for Aboriginal families that do it tough. That has a ripple effect through the place. And so when you see people like that, I sometimes do my best to model myself on people that I see at those relationships. You build a rapport with the kids. The kids know you care for them and as a result you build on that relationship.”

Harry knew that there “still exists in here a subtle prejudicial behaviour and so if we’re doing something to change that around, and that you do through actions you can’t do that by making speeches. In this sort of community, the indigenous community judge you on what you do and you can erode all that you do by displaying prejudice.” One example was when some teachers and Aboriginal people went for
coffee in Dubbo. “A couple of people came up to me later, that were from Gil and
said, ‘And who were you out with and what were you doing with the Aboriginal
people?’ I don’t see things in that light, and just to go and have coffee.”

**Activities and Processes**

**Aboriginal Community People**

The Aboriginal people throughout the interview were most forthcoming in their
views about the importance of positive community-school relationships. They
commented that “school is, in every community, a meeting place, you believe it or
not. If you look at it, all the kids go to school and we’ve got grandkids like you were
saying and our own kids there. Everyone’s got to go to school and if we don’t work
together then it doesn’t happen, our kids won’t get education and neither will anyone
else. So we’ve got to work together to make it happen and as an AEA I feel it’s
important that with the community we all work together. When, if anything is
happening at school, we who are working in school need to get out and let them know
what’s there and encourage them to come in and be involved in it. We’ve been all
doing that so that’s what we’ve been doing and I think that’s the way. It hasn’t been
easy but that’s why it seems like we have success there, because we make a point of
going out and inviting them in. And our nationality, like we’re shy and that, we don’t
like coming in, we don’t like fronting up or speaking up.”

The AEAs believe that working with community has to be ongoing. “You’ve got
to keep going down and inviting them. Telling them what’s going on and getting them
involved in what you’re doing and giving them a responsibility. I think it’s not only
with the involvement but show them that it’s important that they’re needed there.
They are needed to be involved in it and we need their knowledge.”

There are barriers to effective relationships and these were acknowledged. “Those
barriers probably are up there but it’s just what we think or perceive to be there. But
not all the time they’re true. I think …it’s part of our culture. I remember when I first
started working here and I wouldn’t go in to muster. I wouldn’t. I felt really out of
place, I thought “No I don’t know anything”. “They’re got more knowledge than me”.
“I feel stupid”. But over time and just thinking “No I’m not going to get anywhere if I
don’t start talking and start …” and it was just because I thought “No they might …
don’t want to talk to me, or they know too much, what if they ask me something
and I don’t know”. But you do, you sort of working with people and I suppose just
constantly going up to people and getting to know them, that all changes and you
think “No, that was wrong in the first place, for me to think like that. They’re just like
me,” and if there is a problem it’s their problem. They’ve got to deal with that and I
keep going from there. And you try not to let anyone put you down like that. But I
was terrible, wouldn’t talk to anyone.

For another Aboriginal person, “It was the same way when I started school. I was
very shy. It’s just your culture. It’s the way we’ve been brought up, not mixing. I just
felt like I didn’t know enough and I think that’s like the community people, they think
“No they’re (*the teachers*) more knowledgeable, we don’t know enough” and that’s
when we’ve approached and thought “No, they’re the ones that have got more
knowledge so we’ve got to make them realise that their knowledge is valuable to us
and that they’re going to take ownership and that they’re going to teach the teachers
and teach the students on stuff they know that they don’t know. And I think that’s why it (the mathematics program) was successful.”

In these projects “when you approached people, they weren’t as keen to do it until you said “This is something your grandchildren, great-grandchildren will benefit from”. Then they sort of thought, and that was important to them. They are on familiar grounds, comfortable territory where they feel comfortable being in a group away from the school to start with. Talking. Surroundings. That it was important for future generations that this be done. I think that all helped a lot. And slowly they’re coming in to the school because they’re more comfortable now.”

The community members commented that, for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children “what we did with these projects was brought it back to relevance, a lot of it was back to relevant and a lot of it wasn’t just the Aboriginal kids that caught on to a lot of it, there were non-Aboriginal kids. They learned a lot from down there at The Pines, out there at Balladoran. Everyone got a lot, even our own kids got a lot but they didn’t know what history and that. They didn’t know a lot of things about it. A lot of the kids didn’t even know that Aborigines lived over in The Pines there. Not only non-Aboriginal kids but out own children there didn’t think about it, you know. So it brought it to their attention. Would be better for the community if they’ve got awareness of the history of it, the town they’re living in and the people in it. So that must feel better.”

The Aboriginal people saw Gilgandra as “a workable community” and that “these two projects were successful because other people and the Aboriginal people in the community, saw their knowledge being valued.”

Secondary Aboriginal Students

For the more senior students “there’s a few students around that I give a few tips to about behaving and just in general stuff. Tell them to behave or they’re not going to get really far with teachers or anyone really. If you’ve got the skills and they want to learn well you can teach them.” One Year 12 student uses “communications skills, stuff like that. There’s a few put on green cards and that. That’s just when they’ve been playing up in class and that’s to monitor them, so the teachers and parents can see how they’re going. It’s to sort of put them back on track”.

Teachers and Aboriginal Educators

Things in education and schools have changed over time. For Harry, they have moved from a time “when I suppose we became very complacent with what was happening and we weren’t going to take any risks about it. When the project came up and Andy (former AP, Gilgandra Public School) and I were approached about it we thought ‘My God, where do we go?’, if we take this on. We both went and looked at it and thought ‘Well there are more pluses to going out and there were very few minuses.’ It was a risk. It could’ve gone flat on its face in that the community could have said ‘No, we don’t really want to be involved.’ If they had said ‘No we can’t go to The Pines’, we would have had to go down the back and taught measurement. It was a risk for them, as well, saying ‘Yes, we will take it on board and let you do all these things.’”

There has been a considerable change in community engagement through the project. As Harry commented “I think up till we did the project there was a very little
filtering of the community involvement in the school. By us having that initial meeting and inviting the community that was a really big thing. In the past we’ve had community barbeques but they’ve gone … it’s just been “Hello Henry, hello Tanya, how are you?” We all eat our piece of meat and off we go. But this time, because the project involved community members and they became an integral part, it’s grown. As a result the front door is no longer a shut door in that you only come here when your kid is in trouble. You’re allowed to come and ask how your kid is going. They were given ownership. Equal ownership and equal roles …and they took it … If they had said “No” or had just shut the doors in front of us it would have been an isolated little pocket of thing that we would have done in school”.

Across the three years of the project Gilgandra community has become more involved with the schools. The AEAs saw “more of a pride out there now within the community about who they are. I know when we have things and people say to me ‘That’s really good, I loved the project. I can’t wait until it’s on the site so I can go and have a look.’ A lot of positive things have been related back to us. True, some Aboriginal parents had never talked to a non-Aboriginal. An Aboriginal elder said ‘I’ve never sat down and actually spoken to a non-Aboriginal kid’ and the non-Aboriginal kid said I’ve never actually sat down and spoken to an Aboriginal person, elder. So there was that exchange and that respect.”

As one AEA said, “the Koori kids are more comfortable with mum walking up now and standing out there with the lunch money. Before it was ‘I’m not going to come up to school’. Now because of the time I suppose, they actually do walk through the door. All the other kids are used to it, they’re used to it. So yeah, the comfort zone has increased.”

Again the role and influence of the Principal was acknowledged with one teacher saying that he “knew his job was to allow us to do the project. And he was supportive and came to things. But he wasn’t, ‘Oh you must do this, you must do that.’ He was willing to let us do it. Well, he took a risk too didn’t he? Without him directing the whole thing, he was willing for us to take the risk to go on this learning journey and see how it would go. Now there are principals, and I know you guys would know and Tanya and Henry and I know, there are principals around who would not do that.”

**Principal and Head Teacher Mathematics**

The Principal believed “we would not have one Aboriginal carer/parent who doesn’t want the best for their kids here and yet I’ve seen that in other communities where they have been so hostile towards authority that they’ve down-valued school and education.’ The Head Teacher, Mathematics believed that “that Aboriginal parents value education. However, the trouble is that a lot of schools don’t push it as important to them. A lot of people don’t realise that the little Aboriginal child sitting in the back of the room is entitled to the same education given to the kid in the front row. And it’s our job to make sure that it happens. But it’s also our job to modify our programmes and take the risk and go outside the boundaries of what’s written. We took a risk with our Indigenous project. We went outside the boundaries. But it worked. The AEAs were part of the planning team. Even now, when they come into class, I’ll make sure they know what they’re going to do and they’re part of it. But a lot of people, and I think it’s a fault in our school system, don’t give them that responsibility and that right.”
Harry commented that the AEAs are “the windows and the doors that open up the community to us. If you don’t establish a firm relationship with your AEAs, and even at times when we’re doing our planning, yes we did disagree on what we were doing. It’s not a honeymoon the whole way, but it was open dialogue. But we all have to realise that they’re the important link and used correctly and with positive things and as an equal team member, things will happen.”

The Principal believes that “equality is something that we work at. We try and have a fairly flat collegial structure in the place. I’ve been to other places where there is a power and a political hierarchy that is not part of the culture here.”

The *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project in Gilgandra was the focus of a national educational journal article which reported on teacher and Aboriginal people’s views of the impact of the mathematics initiative. The text of this article is reproduced in Appendix 1.
Analysis and Discussion

The *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project has given priority to the voices of Aboriginal people as an essential means to enhancing the cultural appropriateness of mathematical teaching and learning for Aboriginal students. Building community capacity challenges schools and communities to utilise learning approaches that are based upon meaningful mutual engagement. This project shows that schools can move beyond approaches which assume that schools alone have responsibility for ensuring learning is related or applied to students’ contemporary worlds and cultural contexts (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc./NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). It is based upon the rights of Aboriginal people to be engaged as decision makers in local policies regarding the nature and form of mathematics education.

The Aboriginal community members interviewed expressed the view that the *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project enriched the engagement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in their mathematics learning, acknowledged the relevance of community-based mathematics teaching strategies, and increased the capacity of the community to engage in effective mathematics curriculum reform. While there are differences across varying Indigenous contexts, the implications from this project inform the meaningful engagement of other Aboriginal communities in their students’ mathematics learning.

The *Framework for Successful Community Capacity Building*, comprising the constructs of Context, Engagement and Learning, Sustainability and Activities and Processes provides a basis upon which to consider the *Five Challenges* for community capacity building namely, mutual respect, alternative creative discourses, informing understanding, home-school-community alignment and efficacy, both personal and collective. Finally, the seven criteria for emphasising social justice in building community capacity through engagement, collaboration and shared ownership in curriculum development are discussed.

Context

A number of key features emerged from both sites related to fostering an environment for community capacity building. These features can be discussed with regard to the physical attributes of the site, the long-term presence of key people from school and community and the reciprocal willingness and commitment of community and educators to engage.

All three school sites involved in the project were physically welcoming to the Aboriginal community, through significant displays of Indigenous art and photographs both inside and outside the school buildings, friendly and welcoming front office staff and a general feeling of overall calm. There was an obvious sense of pride in the presentation of the schools through their gardens, playgrounds and buildings with a noticeable absence of graffiti, building damage and litter. It was obvious that the schools took pride in their presentation and that this was respected by their communities, staff and students. There was a sense of self-respect amongst the students and staff of each school. As well, the schools were seen as important centres within the communities.
Of particular note was the pride taken by all involved in the outdoor learning area at Gilgandra High School. The learning space reflects the calm about the school. In the words of one of the Year 10 Aboriginal students who spoke with the researchers for over an hour in this space, it gave him “a feeling of serenity”.

Staff, students and community at all of the schools commented that there was really no overt racism occurring. When isolated instances of conflict occurred, those involved were clearly told by school or community that it was just not acceptable in these locations. People from all groups took the responsibility for ensuring harmony. At Crawford Public School, for example, a much repeated statement was that “it was just not the Crawford way”.

In all the sites, there are key members of the communities and the school leadership teams who have shown long-term commitment to their roles in developing the strengths of the schools and their engagement with their communities. Of particular note are the roles played by some school executive members and the Aboriginal Education Assistants. These roles are seen as a core part of the business for each of these people and as something in which they would naturally expect to be involved. The data identify people at both sites who provide role models for other sites in terms of their skills and knowledges and the ways in which they act and interact to build community capacity. Of particular importance in the sites studied were the following people.

**Crawford.**
- Aboriginal Education Assistant; Principal; Assistant Principal.

**Gilgandra.**
- Aboriginal Education Assistants (primary and secondary schools); Principal (secondary school); Head Teacher, Mathematics; Assistant Principal (primary school).
In the sites, there was an expressed willingness to go beyond an involvement of the community through traditional parent/teacher meetings, school barbecues and sports days, to move towards a purposeful engagement of community in providing appropriate learning opportunities for Aboriginal students. This willingness was evident in a long-term commitment to build relationships between school and community and mutual trust and respect among all involved. Examples of this include the in-class tutoring at Crawford, collaboration in curriculum development in both sites, the development of a website dedicated to community engagement at Gilgandra and support from the local Aboriginal Lands Councils in giving permission for Aboriginal sites to be used as learning spaces.

**Engagement and Learning**

By coming together and engaging in community capacity building, all participants are engaged in learning. For example, many of the teachers interviewed noted how much they had learned about the communities, Aboriginal people and themselves through the *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project. The teachers were mentored by the Aboriginal educators and community people in developing a different appreciation of the learning ways of their Aboriginal students.

When Aboriginal people and the community are engaged in the school curriculum, with their knowledge and presence valued, they come to feel a greater part of the school. In *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts*, such engagement has developed a greater awareness amongst all participants of Aboriginal culture and the importance of education and learning. This awareness amongst all leads to other opportunities for change within communities. Such engagement can reduce the frustration amongst teachers who are trying to fit students into a particular curriculum pattern. As well, it provides opportunities to celebrate community leadership and social justice in building a fairer community for all. Engagement in this project has influenced the competencies, attitudes, values and actions of all participants as can be seen from the interview comments.

**Sustainability**

The effects of many educational initiatives are short-term and unsustained. One of the features of the approach taken in *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* was to endeavour to have the changes last well beyond the intervention period. There was a commitment to an engaged presence of the Aboriginal community within the school and a clear purpose in the tasks undertaken. From the beginning of the project, there was a shared understanding amongst all of the collaborative nature of the tasks which led to an ongoing involvement of participants over time. The indications from these participants are that they now feel in a position to continue similar initiatives generated from within their own schools and communities.

The coming together of the knowledges of all participants has led to an enhanced understanding of each others’ roles within community and a deeper appreciation of the complementarity of these roles. Key features of the sites that have made this possible are:

- an environment of openness and trust;
- mutual respect;
- sincerity in establishing and maintaining relationships;
• a shared commitment to the tasks involved;
• effective leadership from both the school and community,
• going beyond the call of duty;
• knowledgeable and confident Aboriginal Education Assistants;
• confidence, resilience, efficacy and initiative of Aboriginal community people;
• expressed recognition and celebration of the value of Indigenous knowledge;

• the presence of key Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members with a history of harmonious engagement;
• an appreciation of the risks that need to be taken to engage purposefully and a willingness to take these risks;
• active listening;
• a sharing with other schools and community of what had been achieved;
• managing the subtle prejudicial behaviours that might emerge; and
• tangible products and outcomes from the work undertaken.

When these features are achieved in a project, then there would seem to be an excellent chance for sustainability in building community capacity. Effective school/community engagement enables participants to develop a deeper understanding of these features and provides opportunities for them to enhance their personal skills in working with others. In both Crawford and Gilgandra, these features were evident and will, along with the strong leadership discussed under the Context section, result in a sustainable development of community capacity.

**Activities and Processes**

What mathematics is done in a project such as *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* is less important than how it is done, providing it does offer opportunities for all participants to engage in meaningful, relevant and interesting tasks. As part of these opportunities, participants need to have clear responsibilities related to the tasks. It is these responsibilities that strengthen the engagement and collaboration in the activities undertaken and facilitate the longevity of a ‘workable community’.

This is not to say that the mathematical activities undertaken in the project have no value. There is much evidence that the mathematical excursions to The Pines in Gilgandra and to Nurragingy Reserve in Doonside were very worthwhile activities in their own rights. They enhanced student mathematical outcomes in special and particularly relevant ways. As well, they helped the adult participants understand each others’ cultural history in ways that would be impossible using traditional teaching approaches. From the perspective of community capacity building, the actual mathematics learned was a pathway along which people travelled to reach a greater understanding of each other and their communities.

Another example of an important collaboration leading to enhanced community capacity is the in-class tutoring at Crawford where Aboriginal people worked in hand with teachers in supporting Aboriginal students’ leaning in literacy and numeracy. While this undoubtedly had major positive effects on students’ learning, it has also had important ramifications for the way in which many Aboriginal people in the community see themselves as empowered adults.
One of the notable characteristics in both sites was the realisation that the activities undertaken could be seen as celebrations of learning and of community capacity. Another such celebratory approach was the willingness of participants in both sites to share their success with other communities and professional groups. One of the most likely activities to sustain the enhancement of community capacity is such celebration as it builds both the prestige and the memory of the community.

**Challenges for Community Capacity Building**

The five challenges for community capacity building that were highlighted in the review of literature have all been experienced in the *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts* project. While it is tempting to declare that all challenges have been overcome, it would be naïve to do so. This project has been yet another step on the path to developing mutual respect, generating alternative creative discourses, informing understanding, strengthening home-school-community alignment and raising both personal and collective efficacy. There is still much more to do in both of the project sites but excellent starts have been made. The continuation of these trajectories depends upon ongoing commitment and engagement of Aboriginal community members, students and teachers in purposeful tasks. One of these tasks needs to be clear succession planning to ensure that as important members of the community or school leave the sites, there are planned strategies implemented to enable a smooth transition. The continuing development in striving to meet each of the stated challenges puts both Crawford and Gilgandra in excellent positions to strengthen further their community capacity.
Conclusion

Matthews, et al. (2003) presented a Framework for Engaged Aboriginal Curriculum Initiatives. The framework comprised seven criteria:

- social justice;
- empowerment;
- engagement;
- reconciliation;
- self-determination;
- connectedness; and
- relevance.

In both of the Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts sites, these were in clear evidence.

The processes used treated all people with dignity and respect in generating a degree of equality for all participants in the overall outcomes. The shared knowledge of Aboriginal people along with that of the teachers was used to impact on the teaching changes within the project. Their engagement in the development and discussion around mathematics learning recognised all participants as educators and learners. The positive interactions amongst all participants appreciated each others’ values, language and learning ways. Differences amongst people were recognised and appreciated. The Aboriginal people were involved in making curriculum based decisions which enhanced their sense of belonging and brought a relevance to the students’ mathematics learning. The involvement of all participants in a mutual learning environment strengthened community capacity.

Through these two case studies and the reporting of the project’s impact upon the communities, key features have been identified that other communities could use in enhancing their own community capacity building efforts. The provision of three frameworks gives a structure whereby communities can evaluate to what degree they are achieving the key components of a successful capacity building program. Each of these frameworks considers the community activities from a slightly different perspective but all have relevance to the development of communities. In the past, too much has been left to chance as well meaning groups of people strived to improve the lot of Aboriginal people without the Aboriginal people having a direct engagement in the process. The Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts project has provided models for a shift in approach which does ensure that Aboriginal communities play a leading role in the development of their capacity. There is still much to be done in bringing a greater focus on enhancing the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students, particularly in mathematics. This project is but one example of what can be achieved through effective engagement and community capacity building.
References


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Appendix 1 – Section of Article Reporting on Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts in Gilgandra

For Gilgandra High principal, Mr Peter Whalan, the new Maths in Indigenous Contexts, and new local content within Aboriginal Studies have been “pivotal”.

“We have gone through periods where we have struggled to have real engagement of Aboriginal families in the learning partnership with their kids, never really having a success rate with the retention of kids through to HSC,” Mr Whalan admitted.

“It would be fair to say that we had a period where there would be a high proportion of disenchantment, with kids leaving school at the end of compulsory school age, with limited opportunities, and that has had social impacts.

“I actually feel in the past we have gone through the motions, as a token gesture, but in these new programs we have involved elders in driving the curriculum.

“Gilgandra is an Anglo-Saxon community with an emerging community of Aboriginal people. There’s a subtle discrimination still there, although if you ask the locals, they deny it. The school has a role in terms of social justice, in terms of chipping away at that kind of thing.

“It’s been real learning for the Maths for all the kids, and great professional learning for the staff involved.”

Mr Whalan said that sitting in on some of the sessions and listening to elders with the students gave him a greater appreciation of the complexity of Aboriginal settlement in the area, the dislocation of many families from their original lands.

“Gilgandra is on the borderline of Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri groups of people, but we have people here from other areas, too.”

He described the new programs as “fairly powerful”, adding that there was still a long way to go. “The retention rate to Year 11 and 12 is still very poor, but the first signals have been really good,” he said.

Following the success of the Maths in Indigenous Contexts project, the Aboriginal Studies curriculum was revamped to include a local focus, and the idea of involving elders has also flowed on into other subject areas such as English and HSIE.

For Gilgandra High head teacher of mathematics, Mr Harry Langes, the exercise has been nothing but positive. Right from the first meeting, with classroom teachers, Aboriginal Education Aides, a Board of Studies representative, critical friends and indigenous elders, it has been “a valuable and sharing journey for all”, Mr Langes said.

“The wealth of experiences, insights and knowledge the local indigenous community members discussed and ‘laid on the table’ was incredible, mind-blowing and diverse,” he said.

“It enabled the other members of the team to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the ethos of that community. Even though we were working on a Mathematical project, as a team we believed that this rich history, culture, ethos and spirituality should be tightly interwoven within the project.”

While in the past, interaction with the indigenous community had been minimal, and almost always centred on students’ behaviour, this time the emphasis was on the relevance of curriculum, and learning and teaching styles, he said.
On the surface, the focus was on building specific mathematical skills in which a number of students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, had shown weaknesses in the Basic Skills Test and Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program. These included measuring, mapping, enlarging, estimating, using compasses, and understanding volume and fractions.

However, in planning the units of work, team members asked fundamental questions. “How well do we expect students to do the tasks we set? “Why does it matter?” “Why will they need to know this, and when?”

The new in-class activities included students working in pairs to estimate how close they were to each other, then measuring to check their success; and choosing the right tool to measure perimeters as varied as the desk, classroom, and entire school.

They also mapped changes in land use near the school with the help of a local community member who could recall the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s; described directions using compasses; and collaborating with students at Warren Central School to measure, graph and compare student heights and other data.

Following these activities, the students had an excursion to The Pines, an area where the Aboriginal Community lived from the 1950s to the mid 1970s, where they were given a traditional welcome by elders and told “personal and honest accounts of the joys, hardships, bonds of family and tribe”, before carrying out a series of mathematics activities.

“The elders and community members were absolutely delighted with the day, pointing out we were the first group of students and staff to actually visit and use the area for an educational purpose,” Mr Langes said.

Rather than being given topic tests, students were assessed through classroom observations, interviews and their journal entries.

The units were completed during usual maths lessons on Thursdays and Fridays. “The students’ enthusiasm and desire to learn increased weekly,” Mr Langes noted. “I also found that absenteeism on Thursday and Friday was nil, in contrast to the past.”

“When developing the units of work, we continued to focus upon our main goals, and we often wondered whether we were achieving them, and whether the projects were successful.”

The results? All students became engaged in their learning and achieved new skills. The self-worth of aboriginal students increased, and the awareness of aboriginal culture and history increased among all students, Mr Langes said.

Elders were able to share experiences with the students on their local history, as well as improve their relationships with students and school staff.

“Aboriginal community members are more aware of what is happening and realize that maths is not just surrounded by four walls, a door and numbers.”

Staff were able to explore different teaching methods, and the value of Aboriginal Education Assistants was fully recognized.

“For all involved, we learnt to value other people’s knowledge and experiences, that everyone is of value, that our history shapes us and we need to preserve it, that mathematical learning does not have to be confined to the classroom; and that we are all still on a learning journey. We still have more to learn and discover.”

Aboriginal Education Aide Mrs Tanya Moore, born in Gilgandra, and a teacher’s aide at the high for seven years, admits she is passionate about the projects.
Mrs Moore knows first hand the pressures some students feel to leave school, having made her own choice to leave when in Year 12 after discovering she was pregnant, with the due date coinciding with the HSC.

Mrs Moore was keen to see greater Aboriginal perspective within classrooms.

“I think the curriculum doesn’t suit our kids,” she said. “It needs to be more hands on and more relevant to them.”

She also knew that the home life of some of her students was difficult. “They struggle, they’ve got to tend to little ones, and their mum and dads aren’t home. It makes it hard for students. We should be making school somewhere where they want to be and enjoy coming, where they can have a bit of a break”.

As well, she saw in the new programs an opportunity to record valuable history. “I used to often go to the library and look for Aboriginal history, but it wasn’t written by Aboriginal people,” Mrs Moore said. “It was frustrating for me.”

Mrs Moore was convinced of the value of involving local elders, and recording their stories before it was too late, but convincing them to speak of a sometimes distressing past, and to set foot in the school where some had never felt welcome, was initially easier said than done.

“When we first started this project, I approached my grandmother and said we’d like community members to be involved,” she said. “Her first reaction was to say no, to leave the past in the past, but after a couple of visits, I told her I’d listened to her stories and I’d really like it for my kids to hear them too. She finally came around and has loved it.”

Mrs Moore teed up the elders to be involved in Maths in Indigenous Contexts for students in Years 6 and 7, and Aboriginal Studies for students in Years 9 and 10.

“It was the first time that our elders had actually sat down with a group of non-Aboriginal students and talked to them about their life stories,” she said.

“The non-Aboriginal kids had never spoken to an Aboriginal person before. They really enjoyed it and the stories they told, and because these students were more mature, they appreciated it more. It broke down stereotypes both ways.” She commended both projects for “closing that gap in relationships”.

“I think the most important thing was the stories the elders told, some of the things they said, about how they lived, carted water from the river, what they’d lived in, how they’d built their houses out there. The kids found it really fascinating.”

Aboriginal Education Assistant Mary Nixon-Solomon agreed that seeing how Aboriginal children had to walk four kilometres into town from The Pines each day to attend school, home again for lunch, and back into town for the rest of the school day, then home again, impacts on current students.

“The elders have familiarized the students with what used to be the every day way of life for Aboriginal people of that time,” she said. “It was very hard. That was something these kids picked up on. They realize they have so many more opportunities.”

The elders’ involvement in the programs has been crucial. “They grasped it with open arms and claimed it as their own.”

A number of school staff said Mrs Moore’s role was crucial, selecting appropriate community members and convincing them to take part, but she believes the projects can be duplicated in other communities. “I suppose it is down to how much you want it to happen,” she said. “You have just got to go those hard yards and make it work, and the community will come around.”
Mr Don Dixon, head teacher of Aboriginal Studies, said the new program, in which students explore different aspects of the local community, was “relevant, significant, authentic”.

“For us, teachers, as non-Aboriginal, to be teaching kids who are Aboriginal about Aboriginal identity is a contradiction in terms,” Mr Dixon said.

Although cautious about claiming the new approach has all the answers, he admits class numbers have increased.

Indigenous community members from families with a history in the area were invited into the school and interviewed by Year 9 students about where they came from, and when and where they settled.

Students were then taken on an excursion to the places the elders mentioned.

“Last year we looked at Aboriginal identity, an extremely complicated issue,” Mr Dixon said. “This year, the focus is on food. Next year it might be sport or music.

“We knew there was a wealth of knowledge from the community and wanted to document it.

“It has been extremely worthwhile. Some of the Aboriginal kids who really struggled got involved, and the non-Koori kids also learnt a lot, learning first hand about some of the discrimination issues these people had faced in their lives.

“The real benefits of doing this series of things are not going to be seen today. It will be in five or 10 years’ time, in terms of improved retention rates, and better relationships between the community and the school.”

Aboriginal Studies teacher Tim Lloyd is co-ordinating a website, displaying the students’ videoed interviews and other discoveries.

“A barbecue at the school allowed students to interview six or seven elders,” Mr Lloyd explained. “Several elders then took students on a tour of significant parts of the town, including The Pines, about 4km out of town, a settlement on part of the state forest where Aboriginal and poor people had lived from the late 1800s to around 1950, when a flood saw most of them moving into town.

“They talked about life being difficult, and having to do a lot of work, but they loved it, the mateship and camaraderie.

“Students enjoyed it thoroughly,” he said. “It was good for the Indigenous kids to find out a lot more about their history, and they loved the technical side of it, the videoing and so on.

“For the non-Indigenous students, it was excellent for them to be able to sit down with the elders and talk to them and find out what life was like for them. That doesn’t usually happen. Gilgandra is a bit divided. You could see the kids … it was opening up their eyes. They don’t have a huge amount of contact with the elders.

“And it was fantastic for the elders. They are pleased with the project and are keen to see it go further.

“I was able to learn heaps about the local community. Coming from the coast, I now have some contacts in the community.”

“This has been a really positive experience for me, and for the kids, and for the community. Everybody got something out of it.”

“I am really proud of what our teachers have done with it. The units are not hard, they meet the curriculum, they meet the outcomes, and they are worthwhile. It’s all about your community” (Handmer, 2005, pp. 22-24).