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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reimagining democratic education by positioning Aboriginal Country-centred learning as foundational to curriculum and pedagogy

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Abstract

In settler colonial societies such as Australia, democracy has its origins in colonisation and so this influences educational structures, policies and what is taught every day in classrooms. The current national education vision, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council Secretariat, 2019) states that a purpose of education is to create *"a socially cohesive society that values respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social linguistic, and religious diversity"* (p. 5), framing key democratic principles as central to this work. Paradoxically, as the corporate-style education agenda continues to narrow and limit an already Eurocentric, monocultural curriculum, and performance-manage teachers, democratic approaches such as critical thinking, problem-solving and experiential learning are at risk. In October 2023, the Australian people were asked to vote on altering the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander "Voice" to parliament. The Voice to Parliament would have provided greater representation in parliamentary processes and political decision making on matters impacting Indigenous peoples interests and rights (Fredericks, 2023, p. 125). The divisive debate and vilification of Indigenous Australians that preceded the referendum and resulted in a resounding "No" vote, reflects the historical failure of the education system to prepare students for active and informed citizenship. Learning from Country (LFC), where knowledges shared by Aboriginal peoples and Country are positioned as central to understanding this country, suggests a way in which we might decolonise Australian education and address the social, cultural and environmental issues facing all citizens. This paper discusses Country-centred learning where teacher educators and preservice teachers learn from Country through walking with and listen to Aboriginal community-based educators to develop the pedagogical skills needed to implement a participatory democratic approach in their classrooms. LFC supports opportunities to story Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing into curriculum and pedagogy using a framework to guide teachers in ways that respect multiple local community perspectives to build cohesive school communities.

Keywords Learning from Country · Democratic education · Australian Curriculum · Aboriginal education

Introduction

In Australia, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council Secretariat, 2019) states that a purpose of education is to create *"a socially cohesive society that values respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social linguistic, and religious diversity"* (p. 5). As the national vision for education, this frames key democratic principles as central to this work. The words from the Mparntwe Education Declaration flow from the page with commonsense ease as social cohesion achieved through respecting diversity signals the moral authority of a society and education system that values the contributions of all citizens. Indeed, respectful engagement between diverse cultural, social, linguist and religious groups is more important than ever in these fractured times when fake news has undermined democratic institutions and citizenry trust in one another (Reglitz, 2022). It is an opportune time to consider how education influences key democratic values of developing active, informed and engaged citizens who have a voice to make changes to ensure that society is inclusive, equitable and its citizens are respected (Parliamentary Education Office, 2022). In the context of this paper, we

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highlight the need for the renewal of democracy education that centres Indigenous voices in the curriculum and gives "space to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to imagine themselves in the future of this country" (Nakata, 2018, p. 116).

At the time of writing, media commentators, politicians and interested citizens are in a post-mortem moment, dissecting the failure of the 14 October 2023 constitutional referendum that asked Australian citizens to vote "Yes" or "No" to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people[1] in the constitution through creating a "Voice" to parliament. Had the referendum been successful, the Voice would have become "a permanent body to make representations to the Australian Parliament and the Executive Government on legislation and policy of significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" (The Uluru Statement, 2023a, para. 1). The outcome however sat not on a "knifes edge", but instead, within hours of the commencement of counting, the call was made, Australians had rejected the proposed change. A decisive 60.6% of Australians voted "No" (Australian Electoral Commission, 2023) to constitutional change.

Like all diverse peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not hold a consensus view on constitutional recognition, however throughout the campaign, there was some evidence to suggest that a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities supported a "Yes" vote (Charles & Knowles, 2023). The resounding "No" vote has been described by Aboriginal people involved in the "Yes" campaign as a devastating blow to reconciliation (Collard, 2023). In the week following the referendum outcome, many Aboriginal leaders involved in the "Yes" campaign refrained from public comment, holding a week of silence that was subsequently broken by several "Open Letters" penned by Aboriginal community organisations and addressed to politicians and the Australian public. One such letter, released by a "group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, community members and organisations who supported Yes" stated that,

> In refusing our peoples' right to be heard on matters that affect us, Australia chose to make itself less liberal and less democratic. Our right to be heard continues to exist both as a democratic imperative for this nation, and as our inherent right to self-determination. The country can deny the former but not the latter. (The Uluru Statement, 2023b, para. 10)

The conclusion of the same letter reminded Australians that,

> While this moment will be etched into Australia's history forever, today we think of our children, and our children's children. Our work continues as it has always done. We will continue to fight to seek justice for our peoples. We are three per cent of the population, and you are 97 per cent (The Uluru Statement, 2023b, para. 17).

The divisive wedge politics leading up to the referendum, the rise in racism experienced by Aboriginal people throughout the campaign (Timms, 2023) and the overwhelming "No" vote, which, for the foreseeable future, sustains the social and political status quo, provide a poignant reminder that Australian representative democracy continues to fail Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It remains to be seen *when*, *how* and indeed *if* Australian society has the capacity to reform itself to recognise and rightfully engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in meaningful democratic processes including within education. Writing prior to the referendum, Ivison (2023) noted the limitations of representative democracy, "some have more access to resources than others. Some are more eloquent or forceful than others. Majority cultures tend to shape public discussions and institutions in both explicit and implicit ways that can disadvantage minorities" (para. 21). While these arguments are not new, the referendum outcome focuses our attention on participatory democratic processes that ensure Aboriginal voices are heard in policy, everyday life and in education.

While the latest iteration of the Australian Curriculum (Version 9) states it will deepen students' understanding of First Nations Australian histories and cultures, it also notes that democracy education will involve "strengthening and making explicit teaching about the origins and Christian and Western heritage of Australia's democracy, as well as about the diversity of Australian communities" (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2023b, para. 12). The emphasis on the "Christian and Western heritage" of Australia's democracy inscribes a particular view of democracy in the curriculum and erases Aboriginal ways on being, knowing and doing. As Eualeyai / Gamillaroi scholar Larrisa Behrendt (2011) argues,

> the Euro-centric world view may have much to learn from Aboriginal Australia. Through our extended deliberative processes which rely more on consensus than the dictatorship of the bare majority, with our diffused structures of power through clans, 'skin' groups and gendered spheres of knowledge and via

[1] We use the terminology "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" when referring to the national context. When writing more generally, we use Aboriginal as we are writing and working on Aboriginal land. However, we respectfully include Torres Strait Islander people when we do this.

> their decentralised system of more than 500 sovereign nations, Indigenous Australians had a much more inclusive and participatory model of democracy than the British did at the time. (p. 148)

As educators, we continue to work to find ways to ensure that Aboriginal peoples' voices and decision-making processes are centred alongside building students' critical consciousness of the significance of their role in becoming active and informed citizens. In developing knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal histories and cultures, this foregrounds their responsibility to *actively* listen to Aboriginal people and their agentic responses in schools and the wider community. Brett's (2022) analysis of the latest iteration of the Australian curriculum argues that democracy has been undermined through changes to the Civics and Citizenship curriculum and the omission of words such as "social justice, human rights, care, empathy, truth, political literacy, discrimination, racism, mutual understanding, social change, climate change and advocacy" (para. 2) in the curriculum. He suggests that school students are positioned as *"building their capacity"* (para. 20), to be involved in Australian democracy rather than as young people with current critical thinking and agentic capabilities. Such an approach in Indigenous democracy education, stunts awareness and empathy and leads to an apathy of interest and concern for matters impacting on Aboriginal peoples.

This paper describes a teaching and research project in Sydney where Aboriginal voices are central to preservice teacher learning. Here Aboriginal-led experiences on Country provide opportunities for developing understanding of what it means to live on unceded Aboriginal lands in Sydney. Through opportunities for truth telling and reflection, preservice teachers build critical consciousness in relation to Aboriginal Australia, challenging them to take responsibility for mobilising their learning when they become teachers. The process of learning re-stories settler-colonial narratives that underpin our current education system and undermines the democratic values so lauded in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration.

Democracy, education and curriculum

Sant (2019) argues that most historical accounts of democracy implicitly link democracy and education. Here "the theoretical founders of liberal democracy conceived education to be influential in an ideal society in which citizens would develop their own potential" (Barber, 1994, as cited in Sant, 2019, p. 657). Democracy relies on an education system that produces curriculum that inculcates democratic principles, values and notions of citizenship in young people. Citizenship is important in democratic societies, however it involves more than formal legal status and rights such as voting. As Staeheli et al. (2012) argue, citizenship is experienced as part of daily life and something we enact through socio-spatial relationships, including political and economic relationships. Here notions of citizenship conjure experiences and feelings of belonging to particular localities and place. "Daily life" enactment of citizenship potentially leads to "conflict, othering, and exclusion, but…can also lead to feelings of conviviality, to understanding, to belonging, to obligation, or to simply getting on with each other" (p. 640).

Reid (2002) argues that, from a classical perspective, democracy can only flourish when the participating citizens are informed and actively debate public decision making. Nowhere are the effects of inactive and uninformed citizenship more evident than in the recent Voice referendum where citizens were encouraged to "Vote No if you don't know" by the federal opposition leader (Dutton, 2023, para. 11). Reid (2002) argues that education has a collective, common and community purpose and recognises the values of "equality". Building on this argument, teachers and educators have a crucial role to play in the daily life enactment of democracy. The struggle to defend and enhance democratic education for the diverse range of students in Australia must be in response to the specificities of place and history. We agree with Fischer and Mazurkiewicz (2021) that it is important to encounter the voices and stories of those who live around us in order to address inequality, racism, the environment, technology and threats to democracy:

> Their words, conceptions, and lived experiences help us develop meaning, and strengthen recognition of our unique and complex identities. Context, place, the personal, embedded with values, become the pedagogical elements that help us climb the ladder to the top of our possibilities, and through experiences generate a new complex, activist stance for our work in education. (p. 22)

The need for learning from local Aboriginal peoples and Country is critical in this context.

In articulating the purpose of education, it is critical that there is alignment with democratic values and principles if we want democratic outcomes such as equity, social justice and inclusivity – a dominant narrative of intention and "hope" circulated in policy and curriculum documents in settler colonial societies. However, as Ng-A-Fook et al. (2023) note, these frameworks have been limited in their capacity to "unsettle the structures and systems that support the ongoing reproduction of settler colonial dominance" (p. 53). Indeed democracy has evolved into an individual endeavour encouraged by capitalism and competition rather than the common good and collective values. This is reflected in several influential educational systems across the globe where the focus is increasingly on individual assessment tools to

measure student success, and accreditation structures that judge individual teacher quality. Furthermore, as the world becomes less stable from the fallout of the global Covid pandemic, international conflicts, decreasing resources, climate disasters and the increasing use of personal devices to individualise information, education systems are encouraged to "nurture entrepreneurialism as exit 'outcomes' for global citizenship" (Ng-A-Fook et al., 2023, p. 40). As school systems and their policies move towards these outcomes, democracy is facing an existential threat across the globe.

Education systems all around the world have also been shaped by market driven agendas. Schools are in the business of competition, and parents are referred to as "stakeholders" who can exercise "choice" between schools. Sophisticated marketing, mass advertising, and an unbalanced emphasis on uniforms and image have all played a role, reflecting the influence of a corporate-style model of education (Reid, 2019). The autonomy of schools and teachers has eroded and because public schools are an apparatus of the state, they struggle with the tension of practicing and defending democratic principles such as social justice, and their expected compliance to the state which increasingly emphasises accountability through standardising curriculum, assessment and teaching strategies (Reid & Gill, 2010). While this model narrowly defines education as forming the skills and attitudes of human capital (Connell, 2013), education should be defined as a public good; one that takes seriously the need to create a critical, informed and engaged collective (Apple et al., 2022).

Providing opportunity for democratic participation to flourish through reflexive teacher practices is also critical in our institutions so that teachers foster reciprocity and students are prepared for active participation, particularly for students marginalised by structural influences such as settler colonialism and socio-economic disadvantage. Apple (2012) notes that curriculum leads societal change, however this argument is difficult to sustain as curriculum itself appears to be lagging behind rapid societal changes. One question to be addressed then is whether teachers are being equipped to educate and address the extraordinary challenges facing young people such as climate change, advancing technological change, employment precarity and growing social inequality, division and exclusion. Student demands for curriculum relevancy have been evidenced in recent years in the global and local secondary school student "Strike 4 Climate Action" in defiance of warnings and reprimands for attending, not only from some principals but also from politicians including the then NSW Education Minister and Australian prime minster Scott Morrison (Bedo, 2018; SBS News, 2019).

Australian Aboriginal education context

Australian education tells a story of a close connection between the state and the school curriculum. Here, the relationship between education and democracy continues to be a site of constant struggle, as dominant, Western, colonial and Christian knowledges and practices are reproduced and promoted. This manifested in social, cultural and epistemic mistrust between teachers and schools, and Aboriginal students, families and local communities. Lowe et al., (2019) document instances of Aboriginal communities who assert that their experiences of schooling is one of having their knowledge, language and culture largely ignored, or at best, tokenised by schools. Much scholarly work has been published on the failure of many teachers and educators who do not listen to and respect the knowledge of Aboriginal community and Elders (Bishop, 2022; Bond, 2010; Lowe et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2020; Sarra, 2003).

At the local and national level, this conflict has played out through contested ideas of what is valued and counts as legitimate knowledge (Moodie et al., 2021). Rigney (1999, 2001) argues that what counts as knowledge has been narrowly determined by Western scientific traditions. Settler-colonial democracies such as Australia, have, as Stanner (1979) noted, engaged in "a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale" (p. 214), attempting to erase Aboriginal people's experiences of colonisation from history. Indeed, Aboriginal people have experienced democracy not only as a threat to their very being, but as an aggressor that forgets, ignores and incarcerates, while positioning itself as "saviour" in the face of extreme disadvantage (Burgess & Lowe, 2022). This leveraging of exclusion, misinformation and deficit discourses, undermines Aboriginal self-determination and reaffirms settler-colonial control of Indigenous populations, undermining the democratic principles it claims to protect.

The implementation of a national curriculum from 2012 (ACARA, 2023) reinforces the "the nation- state's (re)investment in the reproduction of a settler national (colonial) imaginary through curriculum" (Smith, 2023, p. 2) including the silences and/or misrepresentations of colonisation and its impact on Aboriginal peoples and cultures today. Equally problematic is the "dot point" approach of superficially "sprinkling" Aboriginal perspectives across a range of curriculum areas, instead of developing a coherent Aboriginal curriculum narrative that teachers and students can engage with at a deeper level across their schooling experience (Burgess et al., 2022a, b). Such an approach impacts negatively on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and the relationship between the two. For Aboriginal

students it ignores and/or has the potential to trivialise their family's lived experiences of colonisation and understanding of their rightful place and position in Australia, potentially undermining culture and identity. For non-Aboriginal students, this shallow and incoherent approach denies them access to Indigenous knowledges, understandings, and skills, situating this content as trivial and irrelevant to their lives and impedes opportunities to engage in critical and creative thinking to address socio-political issues that prepare them for active citizenship. The relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students remains therefore an "us and them" account of each other's reality at best and at worst, feeds the intergenerational racism that plagues Australian society (Burgess & Evans, 2017). Ultimately, for all students this limits their understanding of and engagement with the democratic principles articulated in the national vision of *"a socially cohesive society that values respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social linguistic, and religious diversity"* (Education Council Secretariat, 2019, p. 5).

This highlights the considerable tensions and dissonance in Australian notions of democratic education where standardised testing, competition and an increasingly overt focus on job readiness (Apple et al., 2022) are prioritised over its stated principles of equity, inclusiveness and diversity. Moreover, these principles are not defined, unpacked or problematised in curriculum and policy documents and so are understood within "taken-for-granted" understandings emerging from a settler colonial standpoint (Hogarth, 2017). For example, a goal of education as outlined in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) is to ensure that,

> All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community who... are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations. (pp.5-6)

Interestingly, the end of this statement focuses on developing citizens who can contribute to local and national conversations gesturing towards the significance of localised knowledges and potential for engaging with and listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but this is rarely enacted in practice (Burgess et al., 2022a, b).

Recent data from the Reconciliation Barometer (a tool to measure the progress of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians) notes that only 37% of non-Aboriginal people have met an Aboriginal person (Reconciliation Australia, 2022, p. 5). This indicates that many Australians do not have a social connection with Aboriginal people. Trust is more likely to develop where groups have previously socialised together and in 2022 only 63% of Australians trust Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people they have never interacted with (p. 5). Thus, the impact of relationships (or lack thereof) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is significant when considering how democracy works (or not) for Aboriginal peoples. Given the long history of racism, stereotyping and misinformation about Aboriginal peoples and cultures (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014), this manifests in poor quality and simplistic conversations within our democracy.

Indeed, it is important to problematise the role of democracy in terms of reaffirming the safety of settler-colonial politics, which originate in the processes of colonisation. The democratic principles emerging from these processes often oppress and exclude Aboriginal people, and so are antithetical to its stated values. This raises the conundrum that the referendum as a settler-colonial tool of democracy, has betrayed Aboriginal aspirations for self-determination. As Nakata (2023) has noted, the referendum merely reinscribed "centuries of paternalism: that we are not peoples deserving of a protected right to be heard on matters that affect us" (para. 20). In thinking about a Country-centred approach to position Aboriginal knowledges and voices as legitimate, foundational, and essential to education, we aim to disentangle democracy from its historical and political inheritance to decentre and decolonise Western, colonial taken-for-granted knowledges and the curriculum it produces.

Given this problematisation of democracy and the translation of this in curriculum documents, Smith's (2023, p. 1) critique of the notion of "place" in the Australian curriculum is pertinent here. Smith challenges how "place" is co-opted to normalise colonial place-making as one of courageous survival against a harsh and unforgiving environment that colonisers have tamed through Western commonsense notions of progress. This normalising of colonisation erases Aboriginal peoples from the national story except as "undeserving", "disgruntled" and from a bygone era who have no place in, or contribution to, current society. This is evident in the Australian curriculum through value-laden discourses such as "traditional ecological knowledges of First Nations Australians are being reaffirmed by modern science" (ACARA, 2023a, AC9S10H03). This statement positions Aboriginal peoples and their knowledges in the past, inferior, and only valid via endorsement from modern science. Assumptions arising from this colonial normalisation of Western knowledges and place positions invaders as rightful owners, even indigenous to all Australian lands (Smith, 2023, p. 1), as well as positioning Aboriginal peoples as invisible and irrelevant in the modern world. As this plays out in curriculum, students understand and experience a colonial narrative of place "as having a history and geography that seems ordinary … (and) … not only normative

but necessary" (Smith, 2023, p. 2), and dismisses Aboriginal narratives of place as mythology. Moreover, as colonial normalisation of place is presented as uncomplicated, value-neutral and somewhere beyond the school gate or edge of town, then the knowledges, cultures and ecosystems unique to each place are perceived as being peripheral, largely irrelevant to contemporary life and expendable. Therefore, Indigenous articulation of the significance of Country (and all it entails) as Aboriginal place(s) is dismissed by mainstream, democratic, and school-based discourses.

Learning from Country

It is time for reimagining a democratic curriculum that not only enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to imagine themselves in the future life of this country (Nakata, 2018) but also one that ensures the ecological, social, and emotional wellbeing of all young people. To do this work, we need to speak back to colonial narratives of place that perceive land as a transactional commodity or object, and so we turn to Aboriginal relational narratives of Country, what it is, and what it means to Aboriginal so as to nurture responsibility of all Australians to better understand, experience and build reciprocal relationships and care for local places. As such, this demands locally-driven, Country-centred, Aboriginal-led approaches that foreground Aboriginal knowledges and cultures. Positioning understanding, respecting, caring for and sharing local Country as an Indigenous Australian approach to education is (re)emerging as a key principle for integrating Indigenous knowledges into teaching and learning at schools and tertiary institutions (e.g., Country et al., 2020; Dolan et al., 2020; Harrison, 2013; McKnight, 2016a, b; Spillman et al., 2023; Thorpe, 2022). This approach goes beyond tokenistic *learning about* Aboriginal histories, cultures and peoples, to *learning from and with* Aboriginal peoples by recognising deep connections with Country, cultural wealth and expertise.

Explaining Country

Country is an Aboriginal English (a variety of English) term that describes land as a living entity and the lifeblood of Aboriginal identity. Lauren Tynan (2021), a Trawlwulwuy woman from Lutruwita/Trouwerner Country in Tasmania who grew up and lives on Awabakal Country (eastern coast of the mainland), explains Country in terms of the relational connections between living and non-living entities:

> Country is agentic and encompasses everything from ants, memories, humans, fire, tides and research. Country sits at the heart of coming to know and understand relationality as it is the web that connects humans to a system of Lore/Law and knowledge that can never be human-centric … relationality belongs with and is learnt from Country … a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country … So, what does it mean to *be* (author emphasis) relational, and how do we *practice* (author emphasis) this ethos with Country, with each other…? (pp. 597-598)

Porter (2018) makes the critical point that Country is "everywhere", highlighting that with the predominance of urbanisation, most Australians find it difficult to fathom that, "all places in Australia, whether urban or otherwise, are Indigenous places. Every inch of glass, steel, concrete and tarmac is dug into and bolted onto *Country*… this urban country is also urban *Country* (p. 239). Gomeroi scholar Nikki Moodie (2019) explains that Aboriginal notions of Country differ from settler–colonial notions of "land" and "place" as Country includes cultural, economic, and spiritual meanings of land in contrast to settler–colonial framings of transactional ownership. Significantly Aboriginal people's unceded sovereignty is exercised when Aboriginal pedagogies are enacted in local contexts with Country (Bishop, 2022; Thorpe, 2022).

Country-centred Learning

In order to subvert learning about local "places" as settler colonial places with a "history and geography that seems ordinary" (Smith, 2023, p. 2), we foreground Country-centred learning. Like Indigenous peoples throughout the world who engage in Land-based education (e.g., Chief & Smyth, 2017; Hansen, 2018; Wildcat et al., 2014), Country-centred teaching and learning privileges local Country and Indigenous knowledges as a relational and holistic way of understanding the world through relationships, belongingness and reciprocity. This unfolds in education settings as experiential and organic where emotional, social and cultural experiences support critical, creative and empathetic thinking and action. This holistic approach prompts universal goals of democratic education such as social justice, equity and inclusivity by challenging settler colonial knowledges, institutions and intergenerational ignorance as a result of exclusion of Indigenous knowledges in curriculum and the paralysing malaise and rejection of Aboriginal people's rights, needs and freedoms.

Importantly, Country-centred learning provides an avenue for building knowledges, understandings and relationships with local Aboriginal families, communities and students to understand and include local histories, cultures and lived experiences in the curriculum (Thorpe, 2022). By employing this relational, holistic and empowered approach to teaching

and learning, students find the relevance of the curriculum to their reality, and a deeper sense of the purpose of education.

The development of a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) shifts learning to a deeper level of complexity by decentring and destabilizing Western conceptualisations of place. In developing a critique of normalised understandings of land, learners begin to develop their critical consciousness to challenge taken-for-granted knowledges and provoke social change (Freire, 1974). This shift in thinking, being and doing prompts humility, respect, caring and sharing to give back to and nourish Country (Burgess, 2022; Spillman et al., 2023). A critical pedagogy of place underlines the value and power of pedagogies that draw on truth telling by listening to Indigenous peoples' lived experiences of colonisation and exclusion. As Burgess (2022), notes, "Critical, place-based education contributes to decolonizing knowledges, pedagogies and curriculum and provides opportunities for a deeper understanding of Aboriginal sovereignty, learners' cultural locations and relationships between sovereign lands, peoples and ecosystems" (p. 3). It is therefore crucial to foreground the significance of Country-centred pedagogies for affirming Aboriginal student identity (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017) as well as Aboriginal sovereignty and agency (Moreton-Robinson, 2019). This is articulated in the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017, paras. 1–2) as follows:

> Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands **…** This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

However, the British denied Aboriginal sovereignty through the false assertion of terra nullius (land belonging to no-one) and, while this was overturned by the High Court in Mabo v. Queensland (No. 2) (1992), Aboriginal people continue to be denied recognition of the unceded sovereignty of their lands. Systematic attempts to silence and eliminate Aboriginal peoples' social and cultural relationship with Country through physical, psychological and cultural genocide, are an antithesis to democratic principles, and so decolonising education is essential to addressing sovereignty and self-determination. Therefore, the process of Country-centred relational learning is powerful in this context because the focus moves beyond contemplating what Indigenous content might "fit" into a Western discipline to one that promotes good pedagogical practice based on empowering and illuminating Indigenous voices (Corntassel & Gaudry, 2014).

The LFC Framework

The LFC framework (Burgess et al., 2022a, b) can be utilised as a curricular, pedagogical, inclusive and community engagement tool that centres Country and Aboriginal voices. It focuses on "being with and on Country" (McKnight, 2016b, p. 12) and listening to individual and collective Aboriginal narratives of place through storying which is often humorous and self-effacing, yarning which is an informal, cyclical approach to messaging and deep listening to build relationships between listener and teller (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Drawing on Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth's (2020) relationally responsive standpoint which involves working "with local knowledge to produce cultural processes, not just cultural content" (p.3), the LFC framework positions relationships with local Country and Aboriginal people as central to the framework. We also see LFC as providing preservice teachers with access to Aboriginal people's "lifeworlds" in Sydney (invasion ground zero and densely urbanised), which includes building relationships with and connecting to and caring for the heath and wellbeing of Country and the people who live there. This creates opportunities for Aboriginal people to have direct and honest conversations with future teachers in the places they believe are significant to their local community for cultural and ecological sustainability, social, and political reasons.

Furthermore, these relationships emerge from listening to Aboriginal voices and understanding the importance of this ethical stance for respecting local protocols and values, as Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) note, "This is the work of your spirit, your gut" (p. 11). Truth telling is an important element of listening to Aboriginal voices and as we experience this, we connect to Country through these emerging relationships and begin to understand the relational connections inherent in Aboriginal knowledges. Truth telling also challenges cultural biases, misinformation and stereotypes and so prompts us to critically engage with the knowledges to understand and reassess our positioning through unlearning and relearning (Burgess et al., 2022b). As we come to experience and share knowledges, a sense of belonging to the stories of Country supports the development of culturally nourishing practices that includes everyone in the new learning. This non-linear approach inverts Western processes by focusing on relationships rather than information, by starting with values and protocols rather than knowledge and action and developing relationships and relational understandings and connections before the knowing and doing. Therefore, knowledge production and sharing is led by Aboriginal peoples in line with the values

and protocols they must follow as custodians of Country, enacting agency and intellectual sovereignty over their knowledges (Rigney, 2001).

LFC also involves *multiple experiences* on County with local Aboriginal community-based educators[2] to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to listen to diverse Aboriginal voices and therefore have a better understanding of local knowledge contexts. Doing this work as teacher educators and researchers means we "walk our talk" by modelling ethical and respectful ways of working with Aboriginal communities that signposts Aboriginal sovereignty and challenges cultural hegemony. This mindset and emotional investment, we argue, is essential in the context of colonial structures constructed on often dehumanising teaching and research that has contributed to the oppression and exclusion of Indigenous peoples. Consequently, relationships and trust are built over time, and protocols demand reciprocity and commitment beyond the "normal" demands of the academy.

Leveraging LFC to reconceptualise democratic education

While problematising the premise of democratic education illuminates key tensions for Aboriginal people as the colonised "other", LFC provides opportunities for Aboriginal people to "talk-back-to" settler colonialism by positioning Country and themselves as pedagogical leaders. Enacting respectful, ethical, reflexive and accountable practices as outlined in the framework (see Fig. 1), proffers a link to key principles of democratic education and perhaps an avenue to reconceptualise this from an Indigenous standpoint. Localising the curriculum supports students in understanding themselves, their communities and the places that are important to them and to each other. It prompts inclusive learning environments and builds relational connections between people and Country, and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Working towards inclusivity through valuing and respecting diversity is a key goal of democratic education, and the LFC framework identifies localised, relational and contextualised processes that all school communities can invest in.

Importantly, the framework supports a decolonising agenda. As Aboriginal peoples and Country engage their sovereign knowledges and practices to educate, this challenges the status quo of "taken-for-granted truths" in the hidden curriculum (Vass, 2018) and the oppressive and culturally biased structures that support these. Democratic education encourages critical and creative thinking, problem solving and experiential learning, all of which are embedded in LFC practices.

If we reconceptualise education as relationally focussed rather than information focussed to activate culturally respectful meaning making, ethical decisions and moral judgements, then perhaps LFC and democratic education can find common ground to challenge settler-colonial versions of democracy. The LFC framework demonstrates how a culturally responsive, relationships-focussed, approach can be infused in curriculum content, pedagogical practice, student-centred learning, inclusive classrooms and community. Critical to this is Aboriginal community involvement in school decision-making and planning, structural change to respect diversity, policy adjustments to acknowledge Aboriginal sovereignty and curriculum revisions to reflect Aboriginal students' lives in teaching and learning.

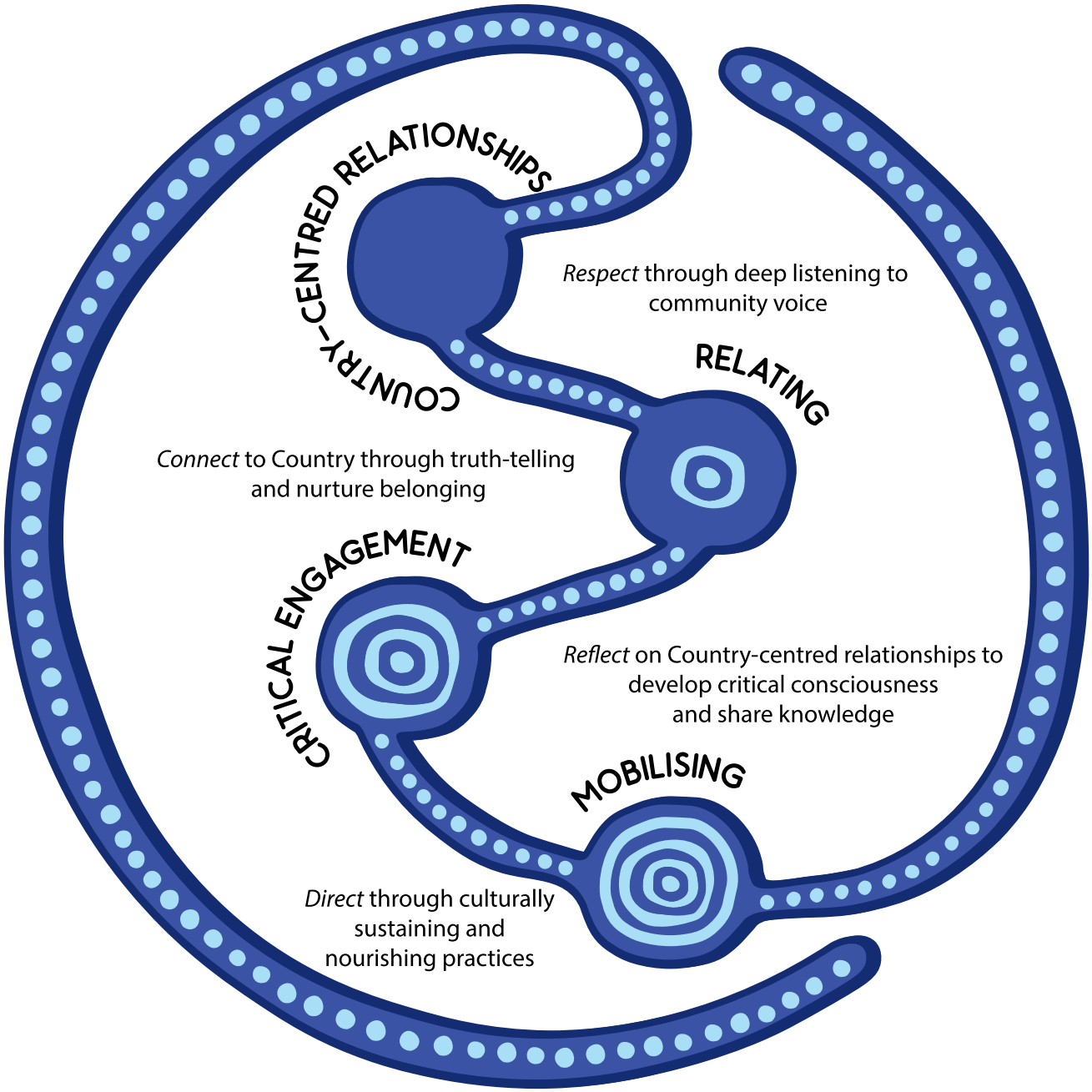
The LFC framework embeds reflection and reflexivity to critically engage with local wisdom from the past as well as new and emerging knowledges and practices from a relationally responsive standpoint (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020). Democratic education requires this in order to challenge assumptions, and the status quo. Through experiential learning, teachers and students learn together by engaging the senses and leading with the spirit and the heart (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020). Collaborative learning relationships support understanding and sharing, challenging ideas in a culturally safe environment. These conditions engender social responsibility in proactive communities that can address critical social, cultural and environmental issues. Active and participatory citizenship is a key goal of democratic education and listening to, and learning from, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples deepens our understanding of Country and community so that we can engage respectfully, purposefully and effectively.

Conclusion

We do not present Learning from Country as a panacea for the addressing the continuing challenge of embedding Aboriginal knowledges in national and state-wide curricular or as a bedfellow for democratic education. Rather, Country-centred pedagogies offer an educational narrative for the future where listening to and entering into dialogue with Aboriginal community-based educators creates space for reconceptualising the democratic principles they can both work with.

In the aftermath of the Voice Referendum outcome and debate, can we imagine the *What If*? *What if* all Australians had, during their education, opportunities to listen to and learn from local Aboriginal communities and Country as

[2] In keeping with the wishes of the local community we work with, in this teaching and research project we have used the term Aboriginal community-based educators, rather than knowledge holders, Elders or cultural educators. For further discussion please see, Thorpe et al. (2021).



Italicised words cited from Yunkaporta & Shillingworth, 2020, pp. 11-12

Fig. 1 Learning from Country Framework (Burgess et al., 2022b)

a foundational element of curriculum and pedagogy? *What if* learning about the significance of Country, the fragility of the ecologies it supports and the relational connections between the human and non-human, were front and centre of the climate debate? And what if the democratic principles lauded in the Alice Spring (Mparntwe) Declaration could be reconceptualised from an Indigenous standpoint so Aboriginal aspirations are central to educational success?

Here we might imagine that there would have been no need for a referendum as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would have constitutional recognition as a matter of course, and issues of sovereignty, treaty

and self-determination would prompt critical, respectful and informed debate led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We might not be facing mass extinctions and climate disasters if we had turned to Indigenous knowledges to prevent and find solutions to the current crisis. And perhaps we can add to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019) that the purpose of education is to create *"a socially cohesive society that values, respects and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty as the foundation for understanding different points of view and cultural, social linguistic, and religious diversity"*.

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Declarations

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