



# The impact of Learning from Country on teachers' understandings of place and community: insights from the Culturally Nourishing Schooling project

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## Abstract

In this paper, we present findings from the Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project data, collected during and after a series of experiential and immersive Learning from Country (LFC) activities with teachers working in New South Wales (NSW) schools in Australia. LFC is positioned as the critical first step in the CNS whole-school reform project, which seeks to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational experiences and outcomes by developing teacher capacity to deliver culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies. By centring Country and community, LFC, along with four other CNS strategies, encourages teachers to think, act and relate differently with respect to First Nations students, families, communities and the places and histories in which they are grounded. Drawing on Burgess et al.'s LFC framework, we found evidence of teachers: professing an ethical commitment to respecting and honouring local Aboriginal knowledges and knowledge holders; understanding the importance of connectedness and relational practices in their teaching; reflecting critically on their pre-existing ideas about Aboriginal students and communities and developing 'place-consciousness' or 'Country consciousness'. We conclude that the LFC strategy is influencing the ways that teachers conceptualise and enact education in relation to Country and community, with the potential to deliver significant benefits to First Nations students, families and communities.

**Keywords** Learning from Country · Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education · Aboriginal education · First Nations Education · Indigenous education · Teacher Education · Culturally Nourishing Schooling · Social justice · Inclusive education

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## Introduction

Dominant approaches to education and schooling are failing First Nations<sup>1</sup> students across Australia. One reason for this is that ‘mainstream’ approaches do not nourish the cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Lowe et al., 2020), nor do they encourage teachers to engage meaningfully with Country or local Aboriginal knowledges and cultures (Guenther et al., 2019). Learning from Country (LFC) is an attempt to disrupt the dominant and damaging practices of education in Australia. LFC emerged from research (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2013) on the Connecting to Country (CTC) program, a joint venture between the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC). CTC consists of a three-day program provided by the local AECG and a two-day follow up program by the DEC, providing professional learning for local school staff. The success of CTC is noted by the researchers: ‘the three-day AECG cultural immersion component had a dramatic, sometimes transformational impact on the vast majority of participants. As a community-controlled program, this is an original and innovative approach to teacher professional learning’ (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016, p. 50). Other studies have shown that positioning Country and Aboriginal people at the centre of learning can be effective at improving Aboriginal education outcomes and experiences (Burgess, 2022; Lowe et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., 2021).

This paper presents qualitative analysis and findings from data generated with teachers participating in a series of LFC activities in the Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project. CNS is a collaborative research project that establishes a whole-school model supporting Aboriginal students’ needs and aspirations. CNS aims to examine dominant education practices and policies from a critical Indigenous standpoint; establish new arrangements and agreements between schools and local Aboriginal communities; and develop critically informed curricula and pedagogies that improve Aboriginal students’ educational outcomes and experiences (Lowe et al., 2020). The project is grounded in evidence-based insights from the Aboriginal Voices Systematic Reviews of 15,000+ Indigenous education research articles in Australia (see Moodie et al., 2021). The CNS model has five direct professional learning strategies; a reference Group and ‘Blak Caucus’<sup>2</sup> consisting of Aboriginal community members. The professional learning strategies emphasise the inclusion of cultural knowledges and practices such as (1) LFC, which foregrounds the importance of understanding learning in a place; (2) Professional Learning Conversations—discuss concepts related to pedagogy and curriculum choices; (3) Cultural Mentoring—supports relationship-building with the local Community, providing learning partners for teachers and lastly; (4) Curriculum Workshops—scaffolded

<sup>1</sup> When the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or First Nations or ‘Indigenous’ are used (interchangeably) in this article, it refers to the First Peoples of Australia. We acknowledge that these terms arose within colonial circumstances and are used variously in communities.

<sup>2</sup> The Blak Caucus refers to the group of Aboriginal educators and community members from across all the participating schools that regularly meets to discuss concerns to do with the project.

collaborative curriculum planning; and (5) Culturally Nourishing Pedagogies—facilitated pedagogical coaching (Lowe et al., 2020). These strategies are interconnected and work together in the CNS project. They are designed to help schools build collective capacity to mitigate historically derived imbalances of power and privilege. Additionally, they attempt to address the failure of the Australian school system to meet the cultural, social and educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The CNS project helps school leaders and teachers to create and implement sustainable reforms that place Country, culture and community at the heart of schooling. It currently operates at eight NSW Government-operated, all-gender schools on Gadigal, Dharawal, Wiradjuri, Kamilaroi, Wailwan, Ngilyampaa, Barkindji, Tulgigin and Moorange-Moobar Countries in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Each year a cohort of 6–10 personnel from each school participates in the five professional learning strategies and a new group of teachers joins the CNS project each year. The focus is on increasing collective understanding of how best to support whole-school reform and to develop teaching and leadership capacity that centres strong relationships with Aboriginal students, families and communities.

The interest of this paper is in the first strategy, LFC, which is about deepening understanding of 'Country' and the local contexts of each community's schooling experiences, its histories and lived experiences, important socio-historical events and cultural knowledge. This deep engagement with local Aboriginal knowledges, cultures and histories involves the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs) and or other Aboriginal organisations. LFC is co-led by each school's Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO), Cultural Mentors and local Aboriginal Elders and community members.

We argue that LFC is the critical first step for teachers in orientating themselves to work in a culturally responsive way with First Nations students, their families and their communities. LFC is changing the ways that teachers engage with Country, local Aboriginal Communities and relevant Aboriginal Knowledge holders. Critically, LFC prioritises respectful relationships and *relationality* as the primary ethic and mode of engagement with Aboriginal students, families and communities (see Bishop et al., 2019).

## A statement on our positionality

We take on the call by Blair (2016) to position ourselves, regardless of whether we are the reader, the author, or the thinker. How we position our voice and ourselves 'in the contested space, the space in between Indigenous and non-Indigenous intellectual traditions', (Blair, 2016, p. 156) is essential to recognising that 'where we stand in relation to others in society shapes what we can see and understand about the world' (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 30). We acknowledge that our socio-historical and political location influences our orientation; thus, we are part of the social processes/fabric in which the work we present in this paper sits. The following few words are partial accounts of our stories and connections. We—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors, researchers and practitioners—are committed to finding

sustainable school reform practices for improving schooling experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Author 1 is a settler Australian with English, Irish and Scottish ancestry. He researches and teaches public policy and administration, focusing on First Nations self-determination in health and education. He is passionate about creating socially just and inclusive public services and institutions (including schools). He was born and grew up on Darug Country and currently lives and works on Bedegal and Gadigal Countries.

Author 2 (she/her) is a non-Aboriginal English woman who lives and works on unceded Gadigal and Bedegal Countries. She worked in the areas of community-based environmental justice and refugee rights in the United States and Australia for 20 years before becoming an educational researcher. With her research, she aims to show how schools can become culturally nourishing through meaningful engagement with Country and implementation of relationships-focused pedagogies.

Author 3 is a Gumbaynggirr, Dhanggati, Kamilaroi (Aboriginal) and Moroccan woman. She has experience teaching at secondary International Baccalaureate (IB) schools internationally and locally. She currently teaches part-time with the Department of Education (DoE) and works part-time as an Aboriginal Community Research Assistant for the Culturally Nourishing Schooling project. She was born, works and resides on Darug Country, Western Sydney.

Author 4 is a non-Aboriginal educator living and working on Gadigal and Bedegal Country with over 40 years' experience in Aboriginal education in schools and universities. She is connected to the Redfern Aboriginal community through family, work and sports, and centres local Aboriginal community voices in her teaching and research programs, LFC, Aboriginal Community Engagement and Leadership in Aboriginal Education.

Author 5 is an Afro-Caribbean woman (she/her) who lives and works on unceded Bedegal and Gadigal Countries. She has over 23 years of experience working with low-socioeconomic students, Aboriginal communities and schools in Australia and internationally. As an education researcher, Author 5 is committed to community development and creating equitable and safer environments for marginalised and disadvantaged communities.

## Conceptualising Learning from Country

Many teachers are hesitant to, or avoid, teaching Aboriginal content for several reasons, not least because of their own lack of education in this area (Burgess, et al., 2022a). Moreover, the positioning of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2011) as optional, allowing teachers to include Aboriginal content where they see fit, makes for an ad hoc and incoherent curriculum narrative that is difficult to weave through multiple subject areas (Salter & Maxwell, 2016). This educational avoidance continues, despite the intent of the Alice Springs (*Mparntwe*) Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (Education Council, 2019) to create, 'active and informed members of the community who... understand, acknowledge

and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures' (p. 8). The disconnect between policy and practice further alienates teachers from engaging with Aboriginal histories and cultures in meaningful and respectful ways.

A LFC approach attempts to resolve the dissonance teachers feel when trying to do this work. It is a localised place-based approach that connects teachers to their local area through Aboriginal relationships to Country and to local families and communities. LFC creates a sense of belonging and inclusivity, and positions Aboriginal people as knowledge holders and custodians of their lands. Country is an Aboriginal English (as different from Standard Australian English) term that goes beyond geographic location and describes land as a living entity, the essence of Aboriginality and includes relational connection to people, culture, spirituality, history, environment and ecologies of the non-human world (Burgess, et al., 2022a). Aunty Laklak Burarrwanga, a Datiwuy Elder, Caretaker for Gumatj helps us to recognise the depth and qualities of Country, the significance of the relationship that people have with Country and that Country is alive:

Country can be talked to, it can be known, it can itself communicate, feel and take action. Country for us is alive with story, law, power and kinship relations that join not only people to each other but link people, ancestors, place, animals, rocks, plants, stories and songs within land and sea. So, you see knowledge about Country is important because it's about how and where you fit within the world and how you connect to others and to place. (Burarrwanga et al., 2013, p. 54)

Further explanation from Aboriginal academic Bronwyn Fredericks (2013) suggests that the term Country refers to specific Aboriginal nations, including the 'knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that particular area—that particular Indigenous place' (p. 6). Porter (2018) makes the significant point that Country is everywhere ...

[e]very inch of glass, steel, concrete and tarmac is dug into and bolted onto Country... because most of us live in towns and cities – we appear unable and unwilling to grasp that this urban country is also urban Country. (p. 239)

Moreover, even in highly urbanised places, people with Aboriginal cultural knowledge can 'tune in' to Country and access valuable information:

I'm always learning even when I'm not by just looking at the environment because that's my big TV that's switched on even if I hadn't tuned in ... I say, this is my TV, my big billboard. You walk past down there, and it says, this is playing tonight. I just look at the trees and they're telling me what's happening. Everything's telling me what's happening. (Aboriginal community-based educator in Sydney, quoted in Thorpe et al., in press)

This sensibility towards Country resonates with notions of place-based pedagogies and land education, which are applied more globally to describe Aboriginal

connections to place that include cultural, historical and socio-political connections beyond geographical and ecological features. In settler colonial societies such as Australia, understandings of land are built on First Nations peoples' dispossession from their Country, which allows settlers to benefit economically and politically from repossession of these lands. Ruitenberg's (2005) articulation of a 'place consciousness' resonates with this study:

Each place has a history, often a contested history, of the people who inhabited it in past times. Each place has an aesthetics, offers a sensory environment of sound, movement and image that is open to multiple interpretations. And each (inhabited) place has a spatial configuration through which power and other socio-politico-cultural mechanisms are at play. (p. 215)

Additionally, Gruenwald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place gives us another entry point to expand on our conceptualisation of LFC. He presents an opportunity for us to deepen our understanding of Aboriginal connections to Country by decentring and destabilising Western understandings of land and place. A critical pedagogy of place is enacted through a LFC approach as teachers walk with Aboriginal peoples on Country and listen to lived experiences of colonisation, exclusion and intergenerational trauma. This pedagogical approach has the capacity to prompt a critical consciousness in teachers that requires humility, integrity and honesty and encourages reciprocity that gives back to and nourishes Country. Freire (1974) argues that developing a critical consciousness is transformative in provoking social change and is required to shift thinking from Western dominated concepts to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Burgess, 2022). Through these processes, teachers begin to conceptualise what decolonising the curriculum and indeed, schooling itself, might look like as they develop their cultural capability and confidence in embarking on this journey to make a difference for Aboriginal students, their families and their communities. This place-based critical consciousness, drawing on Aboriginal understandings of place, can be understood as 'Country consciousness' (see also Thorpe et al., 2021, p. 59).

## Methodological approach

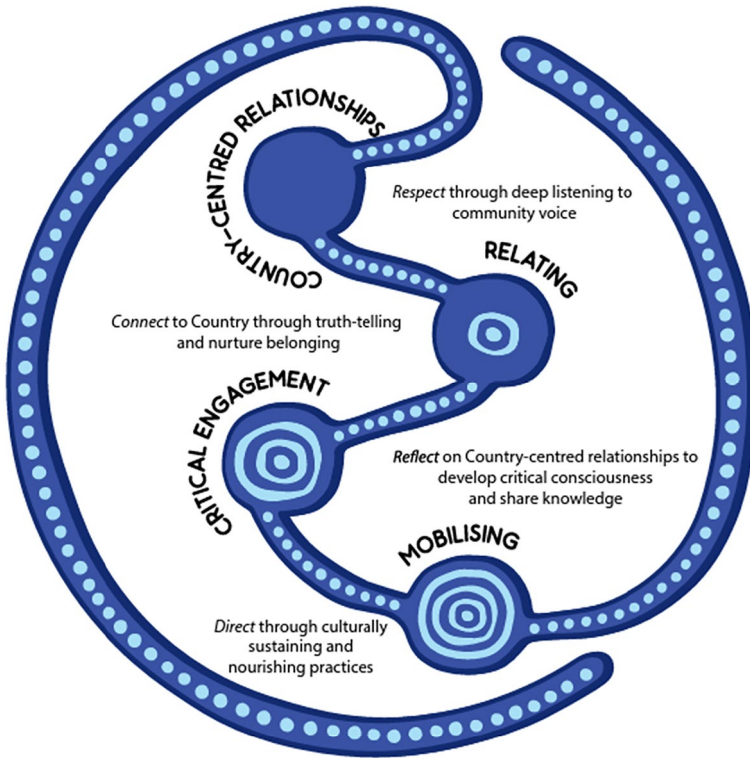
The LFC strategy and the CNS project are more broadly guided by critical Indigenous methodologies (Guenther et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2020). This approach to research and action privileges and prioritises localised Indigenous knowledges, histories and experiences. The CNS project centres *relationality*—between teachers and students, between CNS schools and local Aboriginal communities and between people (including teachers and students) and Country. The LFC strategy is primarily concerned with the relationality between people and Country and how teachers can embed it into their practice to make schooling more meaningful for students—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Those involved in the CNS project are committed to achieving substantive change to the practices, understandings and conditions that structure schooling in Australia, towards the ultimate goal of improving Aboriginal students' experiences

of education (Lowe et al., 2020, p. 470). The research project has been approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. HC200310).

All participating CNS schools have engaged in LFC, regardless of whether they are in urban, regional or remote locations. Eight schools were involved in the LFC strategy and teachers from across the full range of Key Learning Areas (KLA) participated. LFC participants included classroom teachers, executive and administrative staff and community members. For this paper, our focus is on teachers ( $N=44$ ) and our dataset is reflective of that. For context, when presenting the data we include the location of each teacher, but in our findings and analysis we have not identified any significance of location. One group of teachers participates in LFC activities per year. Two schools did not join CNS until 2022, the second year of the project. In total, 14 groups of teachers participated in LFC activities across the first 2 years of CNS' operation. Because of the unique context of each school, the decision about who would be involved in the project was made locally. The LFC experiences are driven by the local Aboriginal communities in consultation with school leaders and CNS teachers. The communities invested significant time organising the LFC activities according to the learnings they wanted the teachers to experience. Generally, LFC activities were spread across two days and involved: excursions to places of significance to the local Aboriginal community; visits to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations; and other immersive interactions with the natural and built environments surrounding the schools and the communities at large. Most of the interactions occurred informally during lunches, side conversations and travelling to the sites. Local Aboriginal communities and Elders were reimbursed for their time and locally based Aboriginal Cultural Mentors were employed in each location to support teachers in this work. Reimbursement was done in accordance with their employment contract. LFC is intended as the first CNS activity that teachers engage in; it is designed as the critical orientating and grounding experience that exposes teachers to the role of Country in holding knowledge, teaching and learning and relating.

The data used for this article was collected in 2021 and 2022. A range of data collection methods was used. In 2021, teachers submitted written responses ( $n=13$ ) to a set of reflective questions about LFC. In 2022, in addition to the reflections, participants were invited to submit photo-stories ( $n=14$ ) about their LFC experiences. This method encouraged teachers to create more specific links between their written reflections and the places visited during the excursions. It also helped them to 'story' the local community and the places in which it is embedded. In some CNS schools, semi-structured focus groups ( $n=10$ ) were conducted instead of or in addition to written reflections or photo-stories. One-on-one semi-structured interviews ( $n=8$ ) with urban-based CNS teachers, collected by a doctoral research student on the project, were also included in this data set. The written responses, photo-stories and focus groups were conducted at the conclusion of the LFC experiences. The interviews were conducted within 3 months of the LFC experiences.





**Figure 1** Learning from Country framework.

## Data analysis

The LFC framework by Burgess et al. (2022b) guided our analysis of our data set as the themes and sub-themes aligned with the four processes of the Framework. The LFC Framework was instrumental in how we coded together various emerging themes. The LFC Framework diagram (Fig. 1) depicts a metaphor of water, as waterways are a life source that crisscross the Country in which our LFC experiences occur. This framework was inspired by Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth's (2020) relationally responsive standpoint, which outlines the learning and teaching process as Respect, Connect, Reflect and Direct.

The principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) were used to analyse the data set. This analysis was structured around a coding tree or schema. All coding and thematic grouping were undertaken using the NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software. Most themes were constructed deductively, based on the researchers' pre-existing understandings of important concepts, relationships, practices and principles related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. A minority of themes were constructed inductively, through iterative engagement with the data set and reflection on the available literature (e.g. Burgess et al.,



2022b; Thorpe et al., 2021) and discussion amongst the research team. For brevity and focus, in this article we concentrate on the findings that relate to the first two processes of the Framework: Country-centred relationships; and relating. In subsequent papers, we will report the findings that relate to the third and fourth processes of the LFC Framework: critical engagement and mobilising.

## A framework for learning from country

The LFC Framework (Burgess et al., 2022b) used to discuss the findings in this paper emerges from a teaching/research project designed to position Country and Aboriginal voices at the centre of learning for preservice teachers (see also Thorpe et al., 2021). Here, local Aboriginal community members led preservice teachers through narratives of resilience, resistance and reciprocity with Country as guide and teacher. These experiences reorientated preservice teachers' thinking and practice from a Western information-based approach to curriculum and pedagogy to one that foregrounds relationship-based curriculum and pedagogy located on Country where place and relationality are central. This reorientation is reflected in the organic emergence of the framework generated through the on Country experiences of preservice teachers, Aboriginal community-based educators and academics, as well as its application in analysing responses to Country. This process continued into the preservice teachers' first few years of teaching, highlighting the non-linear, reflexive and relational process that links the past, present and future in a lifelong learning journey. The success of LFC with pre-service and early-career teachers was the reason that it was included in the CNS project.

The above LFC Framework diagram (Burgess et al., 2022b, p. 931) depicts a metaphor of water, as waterways are a life source that crisscross the Country in which our LFC experiences occur.

The dark blue acknowledges that Country is strong—it is 'full' of knowledge. The light blue circles represent the 'activity' emanating and rippling throughout the Learning from Country processes which include deep listening to Aboriginal community voices and truth telling. There is a rippling of knowledge and relational connections that flow from one waterhole to the next. As each waterhole ripples with new knowledge and impacts on existing knowledge, it flows into the next waterhole. The connecting waterways between the waterholes represent the ebb and flow of knowledges and understandings that ripple through each waterhole... (Burgess et al., 2022b)

As the teachers found, these bodies of water can be calm, choppy, even rough, but by continuing to build relationships and understand the relational connections in their 'new' Country, this helps them to move along the ebb and flow that is quintessentially teaching.

As noted above, this framework was inspired by Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth's (2020) metaphors for process outlined in their relationally responsive standpoint. They describe this as follows:

1. The first step of Respect is aligned with values and protocols of introduction, setting rules and boundaries. This is the work of your spirit, your gut.
2. The second step, Connect, is about establishing strong relationships and routines of exchange that are equal for all involved. Your way of being is your way of relating, because all things only exist in relationship to other things. This is the work of your heart.
3. The third step, Reflect, is about thinking as part of the group and collectively establishing a shared body of knowledge to inform what you will do. This is the work of the head.
4. The final step, Direct, is about acting on that shared knowledge in ways that are negotiated by all. This is the work of the hands. (p. 11-12)

This approach was evident in the way teachers inverted their thinking and practice to prioritise values, protocols and relationship-building with Aboriginal people to demonstrate respect and begin to connect with Country and the knowledges that emerge. This reordering is represented in the first waterhole of the framework, ‘Country-centred relationships’, which flows onto the next waterhole, ‘[Relating](#)’.

Through deep listening and affective engagement with truth telling, teachers felt a sense of belonging to Aboriginal narratives of Country, including the often-traumatic knowledges that emerge from colonisation. As the Aboriginal community-based educators generously invited the teachers to better understand Australia’s complex history from an Aboriginal standpoint (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020), teachers developed their critical engagement (third process) with this ‘new’ knowledge, reflecting on their positionality and relationship to these narratives, as well as to their role and responsibility as teacher.

Upon understanding the deep relational connections between Country, Aboriginal people and knowledges, teachers felt more confident in sharing knowledges and mobilising these through culturally nourishing teaching practices (fourth process). Enacting Country in this way acknowledges sovereignty, reciprocity and Aboriginal knowledges in respectful ways that continue to strengthen critical relationships and build confidence to decolonise educational structures and processes that marginalise Aboriginal students and their families.

## Findings and analysis

### Developing Country Centred Relationships

A primary objective of the CNS project is to develop a sustainable model of schooling that produces ‘educational experiences that improve the academic achievements of Indigenous students, while also further strengthening their identities and connections to place’ (Lowe et al., 2020, p. 468). LFC is a core strategy of the project that supports the development of productive and sustained educative partnerships between schools and Aboriginal communities. Responses from teachers after the LFC experiences demonstrate the strategy’s impact on their

understandings of Country and community. Teacher responses show a deepening ethical commitment to respecting and honouring local Aboriginal knowledges and knowledge holders.

### Country as inspiration

Several teachers described LFC as an inspiration and a starting point for ongoing professional development and personal growth, indicating their increasing respect for Country and community. Moreover, we found some evidence of teachers positioning 'Country as teacher' (McKnight, 2016, p. 12). Some of their reflections can be interpreted as evidence of a growing capacity for reflexivity, deep listening and cultural humility, as they sought to make sense of their responses to LFC. Examples included making moves away from seeing humans as the only knowledge holders and making some emergent 'relational connections to Country' (Burgess et al., 2022a, 2022b, p. 163). This change gives us hope that the LFC experiences can assist teachers to value knowledge systems other than dominant Western notions (see also Thorpe et al., 2021, p. 60).

Integral to experiencing Country was developing a growing understanding of community, as teachers participated in the ethical processes of respecting local Aboriginal community peoples and their narratives of place (Thorpe et al., 2021). Teachers started to appreciate the importance of connections between families, organisations and local social and cultural activities and the impact of colonisation on these. Through LFC, teachers deepened their understanding of and respect for community and Country. For example, a teacher in a remote school described Country as a powerful unifying force for all peoples living in Australia:

It's one of the things that was most exciting about the project – it was centred on Country ...that's what brings everyone who lives on this Country together. Whatever cultural background you have, there is a sense that this is special sacred land. And by living here you're changed. ... We're all in Country, we're all on Country. And that to me felt like a real bridge as well. (Focus group participant)

Another teacher, this time from an urban location, demonstrated an appreciation of the central importance and omnipresence of Country and expressed a desire to share this knowledge with others: 'I think, you know, showing everybody how important Country is and where it is. It's everywhere' (Mel). Making a related point, a teacher from another school emphasised the diversity of understandings of Country within and between Aboriginal communities:

The only thing that remains the same in these perspectives of the same Country, is the consistency of the formation of the land, sun, water etc. This ignites my understanding of Country, that just because the land is perceived one way to one individual or group, it does not mean it is viewed the same by another individual or group, specifically, culturally. (Bianca)

Also emphasising the centrality of Country, Umar, a teacher at a regional school, explained it as the starting point for further investigation of local Aboriginal peoples, histories and cultures:

The biggest thing for me is that it's the spark that starts it. So, it's the spark, the inspiration that and the inspiration to maybe learn more, or to find out more to make those connections ... Yeah, so just like an inspiration... I think by itself, it's probably not enough but it's enough to start you looking further. (Umar)

We argue that these teachers' growing appreciation of the fundamental importance of Country in learning and teaching increases their sense of belonging and embeddedness in place and community. These realisations can be viewed as examples of teachers developing their personal 'critical pedagogies of place', which Thorpe and colleagues describe as 'a deep understanding of the importance of place and the inherent significance of "Country" in an Indigenous framing of place' (2021, p. 59). As one of the teachers, Uday, notes: 'The connection to Country and the sense of belonging is quite pivotal'.

### Country as Teacher

By positioning Country as teacher (McKnight, 2016) many teachers are foregrounding accountability, reciprocity and obligation to Country and community. Several teachers stated that they learn something new every time they are on Country and are starting to see Country as a teacher, ascribing it with agency and a life force in line with Aboriginal worldviews. Bird Rose (1996) notes that 'Aboriginal people talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person' (1996, p. 7). This notion was reflected in the way some teachers personified Country and viewed it as a source of knowledge. For example, Uday stated: 'Every time I'm on Country I learn something new. I consolidate previous learning and look forward to the next chance to learn'. Moreover, Umar described a significant shift in his worldview, related to his LFC experiences:

That was the first time I'd seen the world, Country, through an Aboriginal's eye. When it - the way he explains how the, the landscape talks to him and talks to each other, he sort of personifies everything, the plants, the animals. That changed my worldview... When I go bushwalking now, I look at the rocks and the plants in a different way, which is cool... I just think I just get it. I think I just get it better. And I didn't get it before. Didn't understand it. I try my hardest to explain it to other people, but it's quite tricky to do.

Fran, a teacher in a regional high school, also afforded *agency* to Country:

Country speaks to me through these landmarks because they hold the history, stories and knowledge of the people and of Country and through gaining more knowledge about these landmarks I have personally garnered more appreciation for the long history of people living on the land.

Teachers' experiences of LFC suggest that through 'deep listening' they gain an understanding of what Burgess et al. (2022b) describe as 'Country Centred Relationships' and Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth's (2020) ethical process of 'respect'. Such relating involves 'decentring humans as the sole knowledge holders and developing relational connections to Country through deep listening and reflection' (Burgess et al., 2022b, p. 933). Several CNS teachers alluded to this, as Bianca explains here:

I really saw Country from a whole new perspective, two new ideas that I would like to build on would be perspective and respect. Perspective of how each culture and individual sees the same thing differently and in turn, the notion to respect[ing] this perception.

Bianca's reflection, and similar statements from other teachers, indicates that LFC enables a greater appreciation of the diversity within and between Aboriginal communities and cultures. CNS teachers described a range of specific teachings from Country that are linked to different communities. We argue that this reflects their developing a more nuanced and localised understanding of place, community and knowledge.

### **Appreciating diversity and localising knowledge**

As teachers open themselves up to understanding and respecting Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges, this gives them a greater sense of connection and belonging to their local communities (Thorpe et al., 2021). This openness can lead to changes in teachers' worldviews and relationships to Country; it is a beginning point for further exploration and learning. For example, Diane, who teaches in one of the urban-based CNS schools, was able to acknowledge the local community as a dynamic and complex place:

The [LFC] day helped me develop more understanding of the local community in which I work and a greater appreciation of the community as a cultural and political centre and meeting place. It certainly helped me appreciate the dynamism and complexity of Aboriginal politics more broadly. (Diane)

Barbara, a teacher from an urban-based school, emphasised the ongoing strength within community:

Her presentation showed the resilience of the people in the community and I was particularly interested in the initiative taken by younger members of the community and the investment in their roles as leaders and future caretakers of the many organisations running.

LFC also assisted teachers with making connections to local Aboriginal organisations and Elders. Some teachers gained the confidence and ability to refer and link students to local Aboriginal organisations, e.g.: 'It allowed me to connect more with the community and what services are available for them [Aboriginal students]'

(Gabriel). This same teacher also affirmed the value of connecting with local services through LFC:

It provides this strong element of context and connection to the community. Also places where you can get assistance or refer students to or get them involved with, but even just sort of, you know, knowing more people in the community and getting stronger with that. Building those ties. (Gabriel)

Other teachers gained an appreciation of the culturally safe environment that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations strive to create for their clients, including Aboriginal young people. These understandings are critical for teachers so they can build relationships with Aboriginal students, their families and the community and include local knowledges in teaching and in classrooms.

### Understanding culture

Several teachers reflected on their growing appreciation of Aboriginal culture, which includes understandings of language, identity, worldview, values and standpoints. For example, reflecting on the impact of LFC, Gabriel offered the following:

It helps some way toward understanding where they might be coming from, to understand what they, their family, their community has gone through and how they might relate to anyone outside that world as a result.

Making a related point, Laura, a teacher in a remote school, highlighted the holistic nature of Aboriginal approaches to education and development, emphasising the non-academic elements:

Education is both cultural and academic and that we need to place more focus on the cultural/spiritual aspects of education... culture plays an important part in Indigenous education.

Similarly, another teacher from a remote school, Nicole, highlighted the importance of engaging with the local community's important cultural celebrations and events: 'Gaining an understanding of the cultural traditions and celebrating with Aboriginal people is imperative'. Moreover, Estelle, a music teacher in a regional school, reflected on the importance of an ethic of care and respect that she had observed in her local Aboriginal community:

I just liked their culture, how they really respect their Elders... They're generous with each other and look out for each other. They've got a strong sense of family. And it's not just your own little immediate clan, it's all of them. But their community, their sense of togetherness and the way they belong together.

This data indicates that some teachers are beginning to understand the significance of community, culture and Country in creating a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students. In future research we will examine how teachers are translating this knowledge in their classroom practice.

## Knowing your Students through LFC

'Knowing your students' is a key dimension of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2017) and was seen by many teachers as a key imperative from the CNS LFC strategy. Through these experiences, teachers were able to better understand the individual circumstances of students in their schools and communities. This learning was reported by teachers working across urban, regional and remote locations. As Nelly notes:

It is really important as a teacher to know about your students' communities and the places of significance... Visiting this space provides me with knowledge about who my students are and their communities.

Further, Barbara remarked: 'The Learning from Country PL has further highlighted the importance of community and kinship structures for Aboriginal students'. She also noted the utility of applying a LFC approach for their students learning. Barbara continued:

My students in this subject learn best when they are able to engage with community members and experts on the topics taught in the course ... (they) ... learn best when they are able to see first-hand what they are learning about.

Overall, teachers' reflections on their LFC experiences revealed a growing appreciation of the value of community connections, an enhanced understanding of local Aboriginal cultures and experiences and a deeper understanding of who their Aboriginal students are and how they learn. In many of the teachers' reflections there was a notable emphasis on the importance of building stronger relationships with Aboriginal students and other important people in the community. Therefore, starting with Country-centred relationships in the LFC Framework (Burgess, et al., 2022b), prepares teachers for a greater understanding and appreciation for the importance of relationality and connectedness in Aboriginal world views.

## Relating

Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) write that 'A relationally responsive standpoint demands that you work with local knowledge to produce cultural processes, not just cultural content' (p. 3). The ontologies of connectedness within Aboriginal cultural life are mirrored by the centrality of relationships in culturally nourishing schooling. The teachers' relationship-building with Elders, parents and community members during their LFC experiences exemplify Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth's (2020) processes of *respecting* and *connecting*. LFC reminded teachers that relationships are, in fact, foundational to their work. These experiences of connection appeared to open conduits of relationality from community members, via the teachers, to their students, as teachers began to understand the importance of connectedness and relational practices in the classroom.

Opportunities to connect in a relaxed environment, away from the school, offered teachers and community members opportunities for emerging relationship-building.



The importance of informal interactions was articulated by Umar, a teacher who recommended, 'Enjoy all the experiences, but make sure you talk to the Elders on the bus. That was the big thing'. These spontaneous conversations kindled Umar's growing awareness of the lives of local Aboriginal Elders. They gave him a new understanding of Country and community and he felt a connection and desire to learn more. LFC gave the teachers the opportunity to sit down with Elders and hear stories about Country and the community. These conversations inspired teachers like Daisy, who echoed many of Umar's sentiments. She explained that LFC gave her the confidence to incorporate Aboriginal pedagogies and content into her classroom. She created resources for students that drew from Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth's (2020) relationally responsive standpoint, trying new methods that prioritised respecting and connecting:

I had those ideas and I started to put it into my practices...And these Aboriginal styles of education, alongside the current teaching that we have, I felt it gave me more confidence to work towards doing that. And then also feeling like, you know, when needed to, we could call on those Elders to come in, we could organise it to share parts of culture that obviously, as a non-Indigenous person I cannot share with the kids. (Daisy)

While it is positive that teachers feel confident engaging Aboriginal community members in their classrooms, in practice it is important to consider the competing priorities of Aboriginal community members, which may complicate this approach.

### **Building culturally safe classrooms**

Several teachers realised that by building relationships with families and communities they could develop trusting relationships with their students, creating culturally safe classrooms. Estelle explains how her greater involvement with Aboriginal education is strengthening her connection with students:

I think doing the (CNS) program, being on the (Aboriginal) education team, that builds that rapport, so they let their guard down. And once they start opening up about these things, then instantly you've got that connection. So - to be a safe person, you know?

Estelle is recognising that although she is not Aboriginal, she can become a culturally safe person for her Aboriginal students. One of her school's goals is to be a place not just where Aboriginal culture is foregrounded but to be a place of safety for Aboriginal students and their families. In this, the school seeks to uncouple itself from the processes of colonisation, the legacy of which is still evident in the schooling system. This ongoing process is visible through the ways students are taught (including the explicit and hidden curricula), deficit thinking by teachers and near exclusive reliance on Western pedagogies and practices that reinforce the dominant culture (Burgess & Evans, 2017). Schools were also heavily implicated in the historical arbitrary and forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, with the repercussions being felt for generations (Bishop et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2019).

Estelle and other CNS teachers like her, are beginning to understand the importance of cultural safety:

You care. Like, that's also a really big part of Culturally Nourishing Schooling, its literally just caring about them and getting to know them, so that they feel safe and they feel known.

She can see how much her students value her empathy and care:

And you can see it in their eyes, it means so much to them. I had no idea how much that would mean to them. And when I joined the Aboriginal education team, how much it meant to them, that I was, you know, with them and cared enough to be part of them.

### **Relating curriculum to students' lives**

A significant element of the LFC experiences involves educating the teachers about the socio-political history of the community, the school's place within that and how families are connected. This helped teachers include relevant aspects of Aboriginal students' and their families' lived experiences in the curriculum. For example, local history lessons gave teachers, including Nick, new insights into students' lives and ways to connect to them:

I can even reflect on last year versus this year, I guess I'm able to relate with them a little bit more now. Because I understand them and where they come from more, so I'm able to relate, which instantly starts a conversation.

Similarly, teacher Gabriel articulated how his heightened sense of the socio-political context had strengthened his connection with people in the community:

Even just sort of, you know, knowing more people in the community and getting stronger with that. Building that tie, those ties.

Both Nick and Gabriel expressed how their growing awareness of Aboriginal history and the legacies of colonisation have affected their intellectual and relational processes; they appear to be wrestling with issues of racism and dispossession that continue to affect their students (Bishop & Durksen, 2020). While Nick felt embarrassed by his ignorance, a result of his minimal interaction with Aboriginal people, Gabriel experienced feelings of discomfort. Being both white and English, he is cognisant of his home country's invasion and colonisation of Australia. He is conscious of the dynamics that this separateness brings into his classroom as he attempts to relate to his Aboriginal students. He is also more aware of the impact of power dynamics on his interactions and relationships with students:

There's a saying that the land has never been ceded. To me, that also means the power to rule has also never been ceded, the power to form our own government has never been ceded, the power to have a decision on what our education system should look like has never been ceded, it's all these things. (Gabriel)

The decolonising potential of these relationships reflects the ways in which LFC subverts traditional structures. It recognises Country (Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020; Lowe et. al., 2020), or Elders, as the teacher. Bishop et al. (2019) describes this as ‘a shift in traditional power dynamics and classroom practices; challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies and whose knowledge is valued’ (p. 13). This is echoed by Bond’s (2010) study of Elders on the Mornington Peninsula where the community prioritised the need for teachers to ‘form caring, compassionate and respectful relationships with the senior Indigenous members of the community’ (p. 44). Teachers’ emergent understanding of the value of First Nations ‘cultural processes’ (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020, p. 3), due in large part to the LFC experiences and the CNS project more broadly, enables them to conceptualise and enact classroom practices that are based in relational responsiveness. Teachers inherently know that relationships are central to what they do but Western schooling models, which tend to separate teaching from relating, act to suppress this knowledge. As Nick says, when reflecting on how he will implement LFC in his teaching, ‘The whole thing of this has made me realise that I’m not going to do it alone’. This teacher is therefore acknowledging that this work sits within a whole-school reform approach. Developing a relationally responsive standpoint through being on Country and in community allows teachers to enact processes that centre relationality.

## Conclusion

Through close engagement with the reflections and discussions within the Culturally Nourishing Schooling project, we found evidence that Learning from Country is providing teachers with a range of positive insights and capacities in Aboriginal education. This enhanced capacity for developing their critical consciousness, which became particularly evident in the processes of *respecting* and *connecting*. We found that the LFC experiences are giving teachers the time, the community connections, and the Country-based knowledge to enable them to develop place-based pedagogies in their teaching. Through a deeper understanding of the local historical and political context, teachers were prompted to consider what it means to teach on unceded Aboriginal land. Our findings suggest that CNS teachers are starting to think and act in ways that are very different to the dominant theories and practices of schooling and education in Australia. We argue that CNS teachers are reflecting Aboriginal values, perspectives and worldviews, illustrated in Yunkaporta’s and Shillingsworth’s (2020) relationally responsive standpoint. We conclude that LFC is having a positive impact on teachers’ capacities to teach in culturally nourishing ways, improving the experiences and chances of success for Aboriginal school students. If all teachers, and indeed students, participated in regular LFC activities, it is likely that this would go some way towards improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait education outcomes and reconciling the differences between schools and Aboriginal communities. More research is needed to better understand how Aboriginal students and families perceive and experience the impacts of LFC on classroom pedagogy and practice and on school-community relationships and if we can move closer towards decolonising schooling through these processes.

**Author contributions** David Coombs: David Coombs led the data analysis process, organised authors' meetings and the division of work, developed the key arguments in the paper, wrote the methods section, the introduction and conclusion and contributed to the overall editing of the paper. He also contributed to and oversaw the coding process using NVivo12. Shanna Langdon: Contributed to the discussions about the structure and arguments of the paper, collected data, contributed to coding and data analysis, drafted the findings section on 'relating', contributed to editing. Zana Jabir: Contributed to the discussions about the structure and arguments of the paper, did the majority of the coding, contributed to data analysis, drafted the findings section on 'country centred relationships', contributed to editing. Cathie Burgess: Contributed to the discussions about the structure and arguments of the paper, wrote the section on 'conceptualising Learning from Country' and the section 'A Framework for Learning from Country'. Also contributed to the editing process and the discussions about key findings and their relationship to the conceptual framework. Rose Amazan: Contributed to the discussions about the structure and arguments of the paper, wrote the positionality statement and contributed to the writing of the introduction. Contributed to the overall editing of the paper.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no competing interests to declare.

**Ethical approval** The research project has been approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. HC200310). We used the NHMRC guidelines: 'Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities: guidelines for researchers and stakeholders 2018'.

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