

Recognising change and seeking affirmation: key themes for embedding Indigenous knowledges in Australian school curricula

**Paper Presented at the Australian Teacher Education Conference
Charles Darwin University, Darwin**

July 8 – 10th 2015

Dr Juliana McLaughlin,
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Dr Susan Whatman,
Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Australia

Abstract

Indigenous knowledges” (IK) in the Australian curricula and pedagogical space is a contentious phrase, often informed by the broader Australian socio-cultural, political and economic landscape. For the most part, these educational policies are fuelled by agendas of ‘reconciliation’, ‘equity’, ‘equality in participation’ and ‘social justice’. While these discourses are important, we argue that personal and professional commitment to social justice are necessary starting points for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We draw from a recent research project on supporting preservice teachers as future curriculum leaders to develop their knowledge of embedding IK at one Australian university; the project was funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT).

Cultural interface theory (Nakata, 2002; 2007) proved a useful overarching framework for us to unpack pedagogical relationships between preservice teachers and their supervising teachers. The cultural interface enabled us to view sites of curriculum and pedagogical decision-making between these stakeholders as places of knowledge convergence and productive engagements, rather than as sites of divergent knowledges and irreconcilable differences. Phenomenology as a methodological approach (van Manen, 1984) was adapted to direct attention to the subjective experiences of participants in these pedagogical negotiations. Preservice and supervising teacher voice was actively sought in analysing and naming these experiences. The key question explored in this research was: *what is your experience of embedding Indigenous knowledges during teaching practicum?* The research was based on principles of Indigenous research methodology.

Project participants included 25 pre-service teachers, of whom 21 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, all with a commitment to embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the school curriculum. A total of 23 supervising teachers in 21 schools participated in this project in both urban and rural schools in Queensland. All qualitative data was analysed by NVivo and Leximancer, qualitative data analysis software.

In this paper, we discuss four themes that emerged from the research findings. Based on the research participants’ perspectives, *change, know (knowledge), help and affirmation* were identified as the key concepts to shifting discourses around Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the Australian curricula and pedagogical relationships. Engaging in critical pedagogies and Indigenous frameworks interrogate the complexities of dominant curricula taught and learnt from a homogenous standpoint while silencing the active presence of Indigenous peoples and their

knowledges and perspectives, and allows the agency of future curriculum leaders and their supervising teachers to develop sustainable pedagogical approaches to make space for Indigenous knowledges in the Australian curriculum in both university and school levels.

Introduction

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands upon which our universities now stand in Brisbane and Gold Coast regions of Australia. We acknowledge the Larrakia peoples as traditional owners of the lands on which Charles Darwin University is located, and recognise that these places have always been sites for learning and teaching. We acknowledge all their Elders past, present and future.

In this paper, we will present findings from a recent project which investigated ways in which preservice teachers embedded Indigenous Knowledges (IK) on teaching practicum. We commenced from a standpoint that there is a need for acknowledgement of existing Indigenous Knowledge systems and their place in pedagogy and curriculum. From this standpoint, we recognise and value the Indigenous knowledges and perspectives that these preservice and their supervising teachers bring with them into the learning and teaching spaces.

We define these pre-service teacher participants in our project as future curriculum leaders as they demonstrate initiative to embed IK in their practice teaching in this contested field. We unpack teacher education as a site for this contestation in relation to how teacher education enables or inhibits future curriculum leaders in embedding Indigenous knowledges in their future work as teachers. Our analysis is informed by the emerging themes from the project's research findings including *change, know (knowledge), help and affirmation*. Further, we illustrate how practicum supervising teachers demonstrate their understandings of IK and their preparedness to work with preservice teachers in the embedding process. We conclude by proposing a 'process model' for supporting future curriculum leaders in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in teaching practicum and into their work as teachers.

Supporting future curriculum leaders in embedding Indigenous knowledges on teaching practicum project

Our main driver for leading this project evolved from our work in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at our university. Over the years, we liaised on behalf of and lobbied for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pre-service teachers as they negotiated their teacher education and preparation program at the university, and how their demonstrated agency on teaching practicum. We witnessed their joys of success and their desperation as those who normally failed teaching practicum graduated with a Bachelor of General Studies, an award that did not qualify them to meet the requirements of full teacher registration by the State's College of Teachers, instead qualifying these graduates to work as teacher aides in schools. The funding from OLT made the project possible, which allowed our support activities extend to supporting Indigenous preservice teachers on field placements from 2011 – 2013, spanning over a period of 30 months.

This project investigated the learning and teaching relationships between preservice teachers and their teaching practicum supervisors who consented to participate as they were specifically interested and engaged in embedding Indigenous knowledges and teaching perspectives. The project allowed us to explore the negotiations of expectations, role modelling and the interactions that occurred between preservice teachers, their practicum supervisors, and QUT staff involved in

supporting teaching practicum. It was designed to develop long-term, future oriented opportunities for teachers to gain expertise in embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives.

Three distinct stakeholder groups consisting of pre-service teachers, their supervising school teachers and university staff supporting pre-service teachers on practicum comprised the participants in this project. Specific project objectives included:

- a) Pre-service teachers will be able to identify their own strengths in curriculum innovation and demonstrate successful ways to embed Indigenous knowledge into their practicum via their curriculum decision-making. They will be able to showcase these strengths in their portfolios and applications for teacher registration.
- b) Practicum supervisors will undertake important conversations about assessment of EIP to support and lead future pre-service teachers and their teaching peers in the endeavour of embedding Indigenous knowledge; and,
- c) The project team will develop a process model for building effective professional relationships between practicum stakeholders (pre-service teacher, supervising teacher and university staff) highlighting principles and opportunities for embedding Indigenous knowledges within the practicum experience (both in school settings and preservice teacher education).

Nakata's (2002; 2007) theory of the cultural interface and Indigenous knowledges, that knowledge *about, with and for* Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples occurs within the cultural interface, requires constant critical reflection upon the self, the relationships between self and others and how this informs an epistemological and ontological understandings of one's cultural and social positioning. This project was conceptualised on this theoretical position, while maintaining observations of the cultural interface as the locale of the learner, a place of agency and a place of tension (Nakata, 2011). The cultural interface enabled us to view sites of curriculum and pedagogical decision making between these stakeholders as places of knowledge convergence and productive engagements, rather than sites of divergent knowledges and irreconcilable differences.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Principles of Indigenous research methodology and privileging of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives (Rigney, 1999) guided the conceptualisation of this project. As advocates of decolonising methodologies (Smith, 1999; Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Merten, Cram & Chillisa, 2013) the research process was informed by our engagements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preservice teachers as bearers of knowledges by virtue of their Indigeneity. Thus, making space for voices of Indigenous preservice teachers, their practicum supervising teachers and non-Indigenous preservice teachers undertaking the Indigenous Studies Minor in their Bachelor of Education program guided the types of support from the project team.

Exploration of pedagogical relationships between preservice and their supervising teachers was the aim of this project. Therefore, phenomenology as a methodological approach (van Manen, 1984) was adapted to direct attention to the nature of subjective (lived) experiences of participants in these pedagogical negotiations. Preservice and supervising teacher voice was actively sought in analysing and naming these experiences. The central question explored in this research was: *what is your experience of embedding Indigenous knowledges during teaching practicum?*

Project participants included 25 pre-service teachers, of whom 21 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, all with a commitment to and passion for embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the school curriculum. We extended participation to include non-Indigenous preservice teachers who committed to studying Indigenous Studies Minor in their teacher

preparation program. Over the 30 months project, 4 non-Indigenous preservice teachers participated in the project. Over a three semester period, a total of 23 supervising teachers in 21 schools participated in this project in both urban and rural schools in Queensland. 7 university liaison academics participated in two professional development workshops organised for the project. Individual interviews and focus group workshops were organised as primary data collection strategies. All qualitative data was analysed by NVivo and Leximancer, qualitative data analysis software.

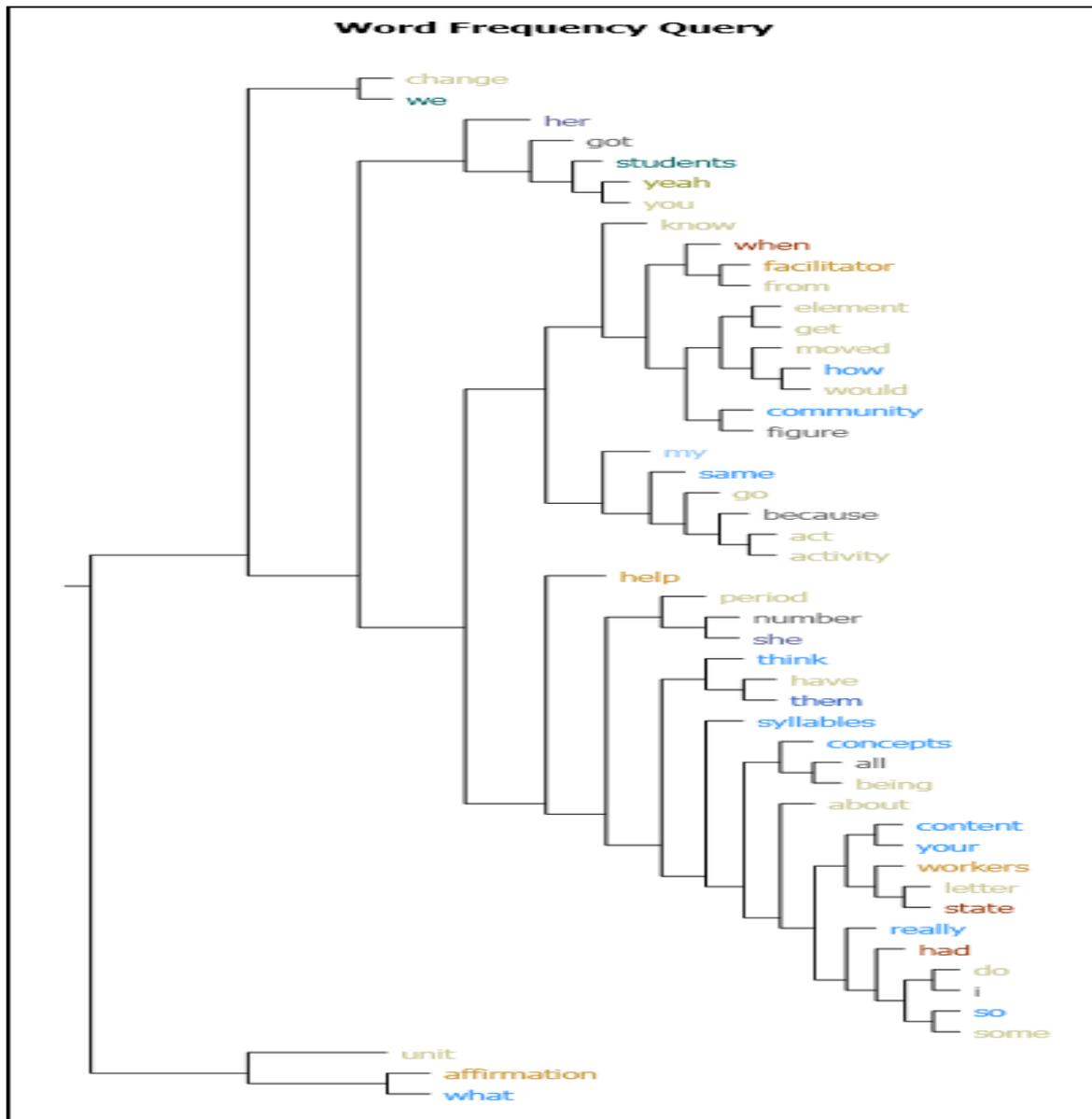
Table 1: Project Participants & Data Collection Strategies

Stakeholder groups	Individual interviews	Focus groups/ workshops	Actual Numbers
Pre-service teachers			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal & Torres Strait Is. 	34	25	21
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-Indigenous 	3	3	4
Supervising teachers and site coordinators	22	3	23
University liaison academics	0	7	7
Total	59 (# of interviews)	9 focus groups (38 participants)	55 individual participants

All interviews and focus group conversations were fully transcribed by the project team and an external transcribing firm. First stage analysis involved processing all qualitative through NVivo which provided initial themes for interpretation and discussions.

Findings and Discussions

Figure 1: Emerging Themes



Recognition of Change

'Change' emerged as the primary key theme in this project. Project participants recognised a need for change which provides a platform to facilitate the process of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in the curriculum. Change was necessary for the embedding process of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) to occur, motivated by political and institutional policy imperatives in respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as first Australians.

Participants understood their professional responsibilities as espoused by the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE), the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) and Professional Teacher Standards advocated by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Supervising teachers' observations affirmed the need for change, when reflecting upon the impact upon students' interest and engagement in learning during exemplar lessons on IK taught by pre-service teachers during teaching practicum.

Simone

I didn't feel a 100% confident at the start. Actually after the last workshop (OLT project), I felt quite prepared for it but when you actually implement it, I found it was a lot harder. So when Sue came out and started speaking about EDB007, which I am still to do, because HPE students do it later in the course. That's why I had no idea...I wasn't sure of the Yulunga games and that booklet. That was a bit difficult. But I took in a bit of my experiences. My main one would be been my grade 8s, which we did family tree ...

Vanessa

That is the thing for me when they say embedding, why does it have to be, I'm going to take myself up and do a rain dance? That is not what it is... I'm like, umm? Now they have these big telegraph poles that have been painted up by one of the parents who is an Aboriginal artist and so they have these totems that represent the seven families in the local area, their animal totems and they have these native plants and they are bringing in bush tucker plants and the Yugembah community to come in and plant them and they will have a place in the school to look after the gardens. They were like what is the point of this? It is just plants? Who cares? We are getting parents, Aboriginal parents who don't give a crap about education and they are coming into the school. They are seeing that you are valuing them and you are valuing their children, they are going to value what you do. In my mind it is a circle, you bring them in and they will help you at home. I'm a non-conformist.

Rosie's Supervisor

It was good for me too because like Rosie was embedding the Indigenous culture in the curriculum and that was great and how we worked it in so I am thinking, we don't do enough of that, so that was great the Rosie was able to put that into the program, her teaching here

G

I think in our culture in the dominant culture in Australia at the moment, it seems to be that teachers are seen to be having all this knowledge. We need to let go of it a bit. You need to realise and be comfortable and be honest. That is the main thing. I have never pretended that I knew what this was about and I even said that when I was in the community, when I walked in, it was their opportunity to teach me. I became the learner. Yeah number one is to make contact with people who have been in the Kimberleys and who can talk to the students with the students about the sorts of experiences that they will have. The sorts of things that they can do in a school setting to embed genuinely and authentically Indigenous perspectives.

The key theme of Change also allowed the project team to problematize the perception that sources of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives were believed to be outside the school and university (teacher education provider) sites.

Knowledge for Change?

Know / Knowledge, as a key theme reflected the importance of recognising, coming to know and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges and how to embed these in the curriculum. Pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of having the opportunity to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in their initial teacher education program. Some pre-service teachers sought opportunities to develop a depth of knowledge through the inclusion of an IK minor (4 courses instead on 1) in their teacher preparation program. Pre-service teachers also desired role modelling of such knowledges by teacher educators, and the agency to make decisions around how to embed IK whilst on teaching practicum.

Supervising teachers, on the other hand, regretted the missed opportunities of learning IK through their own teacher preparation programs, but applauded opportunities for professional development offered by DETE and other IK program providers. Their knowledge of IK was further enhanced by building school and community relationships and partnerships for education.

Cassie's Supervisor

(She's) Torres Strait Islander. I had no idea. But fantastic worker, very good. From what I've seen - because I'm not in the rooms all the time but head in the right direction and working really well so I'm really happy with it. I'd quite easily have her back again. But I'm doing First Australians and Social Justice at the moment at uni towards my Bachelor so that's why it's really peaked my interest...But it's just been fantastic because, like I said, I had no idea. I had no idea what had happened and just finding out all this information I thought why aren't we doing something about it? Why can't we integrate that into our learning in the centre? Why can't we help those indigenous children? I mean look we have maybe two indigenous children in the centre but why isn't there something that we can do for them?

Taney's site supervisor

I think what the universities can do is to talk with students about the reality of where they might be teaching. I am an example. I grew up in Brisbane. I went to school in Brisbane and I lived in the south east corner, I went to Uni there. But reality is that I could get sent anywhere. Now my first posting was to the Gold Coast. That was where I grew up. I learnt about all this stuff that I am talking about, when I got here. Not at University. I think the students, the pre-service teachers need to have a realistic picture of where they could possibly be teaching. They also need to know realistic data about, we call it 'the gap' because that is just what the term is. I actually don't like that term. I think that they need to know that it exists. It exists in health, in education, social and economic. They need to know all of that stuff because the reality is in a lot of areas that they go, if they go to regional areas, there is going to be a high percentage of Indigenous students, they are going to an Indigenous community. They need to know all that stuff. I think they need to know about the history as well. I knew all that stuff because I am SOSE teacher so I am geography and history trained. But I didn't experience any of that when I was growing up in Brisbane there was no Aboriginal people at the school that I went to.

Help emerged as another key theme in this project data. Both pre-service teachers and their supervising teachers recognised the importance of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges in the curriculum. Without a strong focus on IK in teacher preparation program, project participants voiced a strong need for help in embedding IK in their everyday work, specifically centred on their knowledge of content, curriculum intent and processes of embedding. Help and support from sources of knowledge is vital to the project of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the everyday work of learning.

Simone:

I really found it quite difficult that's why I sent you guys a few messages, I had no idea and I did not touch on much as I would have liked, that's why I sent you guys those messages. We spoke about art royalties with Indigenous perspectives rather than looking at authors or artists, I mean art and music.

Rosie's Supervisor

Yes don't just say let's consider it and then ask this person of Australian/Greek heritage to know all about indigenous perspectives. I don't know. I'm happy - but just tell me what to do. This is one thing I need someone to tell me what to do. Just listening to Rosie I learnt so much from her that - and especially in this world of technology that there's so much available surely they could give us something

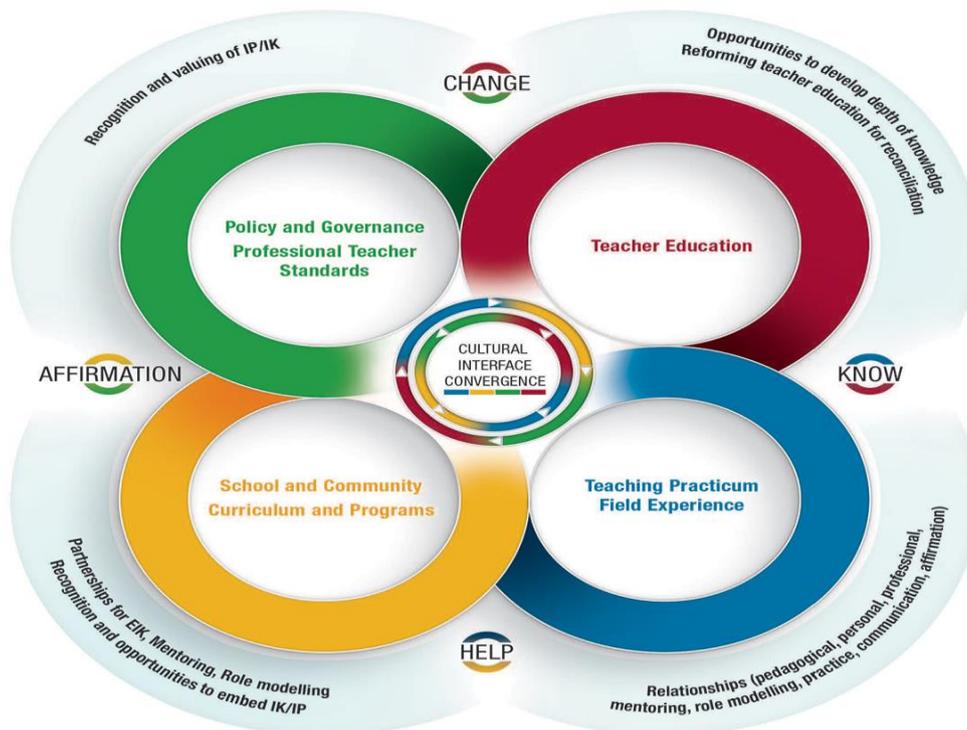
Affirmation was identified as a major theme that emerged through this project. The recognition and valuing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders knowledges and perspectives instigated teachers' determination to embed Indigenous knowledges in the curriculum and pedagogy. Yet, there was much uncertainty and anxiety by non-Indigenous pre-service and their supervising teachers and site coordinators on what, how and when to embed. We contend that uncertainty around how to embed IK can be mediated through facilitated opportunities for conversations to occur between stakeholders, which may take different forms and can be determined by contexts and needs of all stakeholders. These conversations can be translated into opportunities for role modelling in the development of IK and affirmation of successful embedding through what can be described as a restorative pedagogical relationships.

Taney's site supervisor:

I mean that there are some really good resources in terms of human resources and people in communities that you can talk to. I am thinking even from my experiences, the elders from within the community, who are also teachers and they are good to speak to. It is also good to see the regular white perspective in terms of non-Indigenous who go into a community and teach and have you know this, just getting their views and experiences and knowledge about what they do. I was very fortunate to work with, I had some very wonderful teaching partners in my first year. There was one lady who was a parent, second year she was my students teacher and in the third year my teaching partner. She was Aboriginal and she was able to switch so beautifully, you could hear the Aboriginal language when she was talking with the kids and then she would switch back. It is being comfortable with being who you are too. I didn't pretend in any way to own this knowledge.

Aboriginal people in the SE corner that people may be exposed to are different to North? Yulangi culture here is alive and well here and you can touch it. That is what makes this stuff that I am talking about actually easy. We have a defined community. So they need to know history and they need to know data about the gap and they need to know the reality of the regional centres that they might be going to. Then what they need is some sort of skills in terms of relating to students. Now from my experience, Bama kids here have a heightened awareness of whether you really care or not. They know, they know. I've learnt from my experience with the elders and I remember this from the very first meeting I went to and R invited me to come along and Ris like we are mates. I saw the old ladies sitting there in the group, looking at me as if to go 'what is this bloke all about'. Is he full of crap.

Figure 2: A Process Model for Embedding Indigenous knowledges in Teacher Education



<https://www.qut.edu.au/about/oodgeroo/embedding-indigenous-knowledges-in-curriculum>

Taney's Site Supervisor:

My philosophy about teaching is that it is all about relationships 90% about what you do is about relationships, it is not about what you know and content and all that other stuff. Aboriginal and Islander kids in my experience it is relationship. They suss you out, they know whether you are full of crap or whether you are a genuine person. And if they think that you are genuine person they will latch onto you like there is no tomorrow. It is actually quite humbling. I think that pre-service teachers need to know about that and how to develop relationships, for all teaching, it is not just about the Indigenous kids. They need to also be able to, in any unit that you teach, it doesn't matter if you are an English teacher or a maths teacher, science teacher, they need to have some knowledge to be able to always when they are planning a unit, always if you are teaching in a school like this. You need to think about it from an Indigenous perspective. What could I do? What resources could I tap into? A lot of that is going to be given from a local context.

Conclusion

The key question explored in this research was: *what is your experience of embedding Indigenous knowledges during teaching practicum?* The research was based on principles of Indigenous research methodology.

Project participants included 25 pre-service teachers, of whom 21 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, all with a commitment to embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in the school curriculum. A total of 23 supervising teachers in 21 schools participated in this project in both

urban and rural schools in Queensland. All qualitative data was analysed by NVivo and Leximancer, qualitative data analysis software.

We've detailed four themes that emerged from the research findings: *change, know (knowledge), help and affirmation*. Engaging in critical pedagogies and Indigenous frameworks interrogate the complexities of dominant curricula taught and learnt from a homogenous standpoint that silences of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges. The agency of future curriculum leaders to develop sustainable pedagogical approaches to make space for Indigenous knowledges in the Australian curriculum in schools is dependent on the willingness and capacity of supervising teachers and ITE educators to critically engage with these knowledges during the ITE experience.