Chapter 1

Identity and education: Literature review

Indigenous People with a Disability: Rural and Urban

When looking at the lived educational experiences of Indigenous people in the context of education-as-culture, as Battiste et al (2006) suggest, issues of access, uptake, and outcomes from education need to be understood in light of colonial histories in Australia and in other countries like Canada, where the authors originate. As a further reflection on the work of Battiste et al (2006), colonial contexts can create ‘disabilities’ related to cultural bias and prejudice. Here the notion of ‘disability’ is deconstructed into its components, related to how certain people construct the identity of ‘others,’ may boost their own social status in the process, and create educational processes and contexts that disadvantage minority groups. As Battiste et al (2006) propose, these systems of disabling Aboriginal peoples across Canada and in other colonised countries like America and Australia are ongoing and critical concerns. Within this broad understanding, my discussions that follow assume both rural and urban, overlapping, contexts for Aboriginal people in Australia. This is a context where people such as myself have grown up in rural and semi-isolated marginal spaces but may
now live in a ‘post-colonial city.’ Likewise, Aboriginal people may grow up in the urban concrete ‘bush’ and later reconnect with their tribal land. For everyone the experiences are somewhat different and stereotyping assumptions about Aboriginal people ought to be minimised.

In this way, as Chapter 3 details, the discussions that follow rely on personal narrative as autoethnography even while discussing the literature. As such, by recasting this method within an Indigenous research methodology, identity, Aboriginality, education, and disability are all inter-related terms united within culturally-based understandings of spirituality as the foundation of education.
The Foundations of Spirituality through Education

I believe that a real teacher is one that has a burning desire to impart knowledge, understanding and skills to students. This is done by igniting the desire in students to learn about their world. Jones (2005, p.1) argues that for students to learn, they need teachers who are not fearful of reaching inside the students and bringing out their potential to learn through their abilities and their understandings. Jones also notes that teachers need to be authentic otherwise students will be able to tell that the teacher is not concerned for their learning. It is a ministry in itself to be able to teach.

Jones (2005, p.1) states that if a teacher in the classroom is less than authentic both the students and the teacher are moving through the actions or going through the motions of formal education. Jones suggests that spirituality in education is a deep connection between student, teacher and the subject. Furthermore, the author says that this connection is honest, vibrant, fulfilling, open, and is vital for classroom nurturing and growth to happen. As I reflect on these insights, it appears that these connections are the foundation stone for students to develop and to be able to go out into the
world to become what they need to be and achieve their dreams in their areas of interest, such as if a student was to become a bank manager, lecturer, mental health worker, actor, or counsellor. Teachers need to encourage the desire to learn in a holistic way (Jones 2005, p.1). Jones implies that teachers need to be passionate about their subject as this develops a connection between the teacher and the student, and that connecting with the student’s spirituality is a personal interaction between the teacher, student and subject. In my experience, learning helps students to move from personal perspectives to gain more knowledge of a broader experience of life’s mysteries. So, spirituality is an important part of life. As Nash (2002 cited in Jones 2005, p.3) notes, spirituality is ‘a straining forward toward mystery, toward a luminous darkness, toward’ a desire for meaning that lies beyond meaning.

Nash (2002 cited in Jones 2005, p.4) refers to teaching as transcended, meaning that student and teacher take an inward journey together to explore the deeper mysteries of existence and a desire to learn more about spiritual things. Here we find a definition of spirituality in education, Glazer calls it sacredness. Glazer (1999 cited in Jones 2005, p.4) suggests that,
Sacredness is the practice of wholeness and awareness. It is approaching, greeting, and meeting the world with basic respect. What is sacredness as the ground of learning? It is rooting education in the practices of openness, attentiveness to experience, and sensitivity to the world. Spirituality in education begins with questions: What is my experience? What is my effect? What are the interrelationships between myself and others? Are these being attended to?

Kessler (2000 cited in Jones 2005, p.4) states that she was drawn to students who were facing spiritual questions. These questions may include: What is the meaning of my life? Who am I accountable to? What is self-identity? She believed that if these questions were ignored, students may experience feelings of internal turmoil that might result in aggressive behaviour. Kessler was able to work with her students in finding answers to their questions and to channel their energy into something constructive. The things she encouraged them to strive for were balance, understanding, integrity, and a connectedness to the world. Kessler also notes that students need to have a connection to others, to self, and to the external world, to the environment and to a higher spiritual power. Likewise, Palmer (2004 cited in Jones 2005, p.4) notes that if students were at home with themselves and had healthy self-esteem, they indeed can become healers and carers in a wounded world.
Myss (1996) identifies that students need to develop a positive self-esteem as this helps in maintaining a healthier self-image. She notes that students need to honour self. By honouring self the student develops an outward respect for all their relationships. Otherwise relationships may become fragile, temporary, and individuals end up fearful of being alone or abandoned. This fear then drives their actions, thoughts, and feelings and gives way to unhealthy self-perceptions.

Students who do not develop healthy self-esteem and self-respect in class will look for approval elsewhere, and if they do not receive guidance from teachers, students will identify with alterative groups which accept them the way they are. Students may find themselves in gangs, sects and other unsuitable groups to find acceptance (Myss, 1996).

In fact, teachers who can help students connect with their studies, their workmates and the teaching environment will help students develop the additional characteristics of self-respect and self-esteem (Jones, 2005).

Students who have self-respect and self-esteem are able to go out into the world to find places where they will contribute to society in a healthy way.
As they reflect back on their years of education they will remember those teachers who had the capacity to relate to them in a caring manner, building their self-respect and self-esteem. If this is done in the early years of development, students will not experience intense difficulties in finding themselves in later years (Jones, 2005).

This is the first example of interjecting a note that refers the reader to another section of the thesis, thus adding an additional layer of analytical meaning to the text. For me personally, spirituality in education refers to compassion and interconnectedness, which was experienced when teachers reached out to me during difficult stages of my learning process. To learn more about these experiences, please refer to the section headed ‘Positive education supports culture’ where I share a story about an inspirational teacher, on pages 149-151.

Changing Self-Limiting Beliefs

Teachers have the ability to either encourage learning or to condition students to believe that they are unable to learn. Robbins (1991, p.24) states that to change self-limiting beliefs one needs to raise their students’ personal standards. But if teachers do not believe that students can change self-limiting beliefs and behaviours, then the process of self-sabotage often
happens. Teachers will lack the ability to help students tap into their unknown abilities. In my experience, prior conditioning and beliefs define who we are, and sometimes we are told that we can not accomplish a task even before we start or begin the process of change. Also, our beliefs define what we think of as possible and impossible and define our actions, feelings, emotions, and our spirituality.

In my opinion, as teachers we first need to address our beliefs and belief system. We need to understand that we must change our beliefs and develop a sense of our own abilities before we even attempt to undertake any new challenge, and before we can influence the learning of our students. Without taking control of our own beliefs and philosophies, no matter how high we raise our standards we will lack the capacity and the conviction to make changes (Robbins, 1991, p.24). Robbins states that we need congruence in our beliefs so that we are able to meet our emerging standards. He suggests that it is the power of beliefs that generate a sense of certainty and enable us to become a success. He goes on to say that strategies need to be put into place to achieve our goals. If you can set yourself new standards or targets and change core beliefs, then you will also find strategies or ways to accomplish your goals. Part of this process is to have the support of a mentor
or role-model. Finding someone that is already having success and aware of their beliefs will help you fine-tune and reshape your beliefs. In addition, he suggests that conscious awareness is not sufficient. One must get out there and take action for change to happen.

In a similar manner, Dilts et al (1990) suggest that the path to wellbeing is through changing limited beliefs into more resourceful beliefs. These changes do not only influence ongoing learning, but can also impact on health including social and emotional wellbeing. Dilts represents the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a field of contemporary psychotherapy that seeks to influence personal change and learning through strategic and systematic understanding of the ways in which the human brain operates (McDermott & O’Conner, 1996). Robbins (1991, p.26), who gained many of his insights from the field of NLP, believed that there are five levels of mastery. Firstly, the emotional that involve our internal processes and impacts on everything we do. The key to mastery is to generate internal states that make us feel better about ourselves during our learning process. In contrast, if learning is based on a punitive approach students can feel abused and will become further alienated. For example, Dilts et al (1990, p.42) suggest that we can become frustrated and in despair after doing
something for a long time that does not work, like teaching ‘difficult’ students.

I apply this to learning and teaching in that we, as teachers, can form limiting beliefs that our work must proceed according to our set plan – our limiting beliefs and pedagogy. Underlying these beliefs and plans is the notion that the students we work with are not capable of change. But does this mean our students are indeed not capable of change? No. As Dilts (1990, p.43) says, ‘It just means that they’ve been trying to do it the wrong way for a long time’. The key according to Dilts is to instil positive and resourceful ‘reality strategies’ that promote a good basis of self-esteem even when at first we do not necessarily believe we or others are capable of change (1990, p.43). Over time, it is likely that these positive approaches will influence both belief and behaviour.

As I reflect on these central issues to teaching and learning it is amazing how we as teachers want a quick fix to solve our problems and to escape from the pain of difficult classroom dynamics. Many of us use our intelligence, influence and power to get into quick fix solutions such as limited forms of behaviour management where threats and punishment may
be deployed. In my experience of working in an Aboriginal private school context, limited methods can stem from misunderstandings of mainstream European-tradition approaches to learning, based in behaviour management. These beliefs, mixed with even more limited and internalised negative beliefs around Aboriginal identity and culture, can form powerful mindsets that can potentially cause harm for students. At the emotional level when we are unable to acknowledge the underlying processes that influence us, perhaps due to shame or fear, this leaves us open to internal and external negative influences. As Robbins (1991, p.26) suggests, if we fail to take charge of our emotions they will take charge of us directing us into disempowering feelings of hopelessness and despair. If we master our emotions we will be able to take best advantage of our emotions in all situations and achieve our highest possible outcome.

Robbins (1991) second level of influence is the physical which refers to the importance of physical and environmental health. Teachers might ask, are we people who wake up energised about the day or like people who flounder at embarking on a new day and feeling resentful towards life? Do we look forward to entering the classroom with all its wonderful challenges and opportunities? Or do we come to teaching with a feeling of being tired and
worn out? Part of the picture for us is obviously what we eat, and whether or not we are cramming our body with unhealthy foods and engaging in unhealthy habits of thought and action. The next step is to master our physical wellbeing, not only so that we feel good and look good, but so that we have a sense of being in control of our life and have a new vibrancy towards life (Robbins, 1991, pp.26-27). By inference these factors will positively influence the process of teaching and learning.

The third level of influence (Robbins, 1991, p.27) is developing sound relationships. Traditionally, in my Aboriginal culture the social network of family and extended family are all important. One’s worth is in large part determined by connection to one’s family and culture. Robbins suggests that romance, family, pets, business, social events and being part of a community give us connections to people and a sense of contribution. Through relationships, doors are opened to every resource possible. Likewise, NLP suggests that people’s internal world of beliefs is intrinsically linked to the world of relationships – we tend to manifest our inner world of beliefs and values in the outer world around us (McDermott & O’Connor 1996, Dilts et al, 1990).
From my view as an Indigenous teacher, these insights reinforce the notion that the inner world or energy of each person is connected at the social, emotional, physical and relational levels. From the perspective of Indigenous spirituality, this interconnectedness of all things within the cosmos is a long standing and respected tradition (McGaa, 1992). These insights are being confirmed in the present day by the findings of science. For example, Knudtson & Suzuki (1992, p.60) examine the stories and teachings of Aboriginal cultures in North America and around the world. Among their many important insights, they suggest that there are ethical consequences to traditional Aboriginal spiritual and cultural teachings that have profound ecological importance. They say,

...in a world in which all forms of life – not just human beings – necessarily draw upon a single reservoir of solar energy for their survival, each creature’s action cannot help but affect all the rest. Moreover, human life lived within this vast natural feedback loop... is fraught with responsibility.

What strikes me about these Indigenous insights is that they highlight the importance of a sound teacher-student relationship. A student needs to feel as though they are a part of the process and that they are connected. If they feel this they will indeed learn as they are an active participant of learning as
culture. In other words, the process of learning is to be engaged in one’s own culture because this reinforces cultural identity.

The forth level Robbins (1991, p.27) suggests is financial. He says that learning to use this level of awareness enables one to carry out dreams financially in the everyday world. From an educationalist perspective, part of this is opening up equitable opportunities for minority people to access learning, and to have full participation in the economic system. Those who have the good fortune to live in an environment which supports their aspirations are fortunate.

This good fortune in education is not often the case for Aboriginal Australia. For Aboriginal communities who have, and in many ways still do, live below ‘third world’ standards within the Australian ‘first world’ nation state, education has not always been a luxury that was or is possible to achieve (Vaughan, 2005). As Harris (1990. p.648) states, ‘The possibility of exclusion on racial grounds existed theoretically until 1972 as the regulation requiring school principals to defer or refuse enrolment of Aboriginal children on the basis of substantial community opposition.’ These realities have affected Aboriginal families who, like parts of my own heritage, were
and are, required to exist on the fringes of colonial society. For example, Aboriginal families have at times had no choice but to live in tin shacks or humpies and are unable to access or be welcomed into local schools managed by local European families (Harris, 1990).

In contrast, if a student has the opportunity of being supported in today’s society through an educational environment which is supportive of their cultural and learning needs, this will encourage their learning development. Students that receive the correct education in primary and secondary educational systems will be more likely to have the same opportunities as their peers to become employed. But creating equity in today’s learning systems requires ongoing self-critique by the mainstream systems, which may still be perceived as excluding Aboriginal concerns (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005).

The fifth level is mastering time (Robbins, 1991, p.28). According to Robbins, everything takes time, energy, and most people over estimate what they can achieve in a year and do not estimate correctly what they can achieve in a five or ten year period. He suggests that we have to be able to
make time our friend and not our enemy. We need to realise that to reach a fullness of self-potential, of our ideas and creations, will take time.

From an Indigenous perspective time is something quite different from the modern European conception of past, present, and future (Cowan, 1992). Likewise, time is not dominated by hours, weeks, months, and years, all implying that time costs money and has some intrinsic economic value. In the mainstream, the economy impacts on everything – land, trees, stones, minerals, animals, fish, and people. Time is but one additional victim of economic rationalisation. An Aboriginal worldview honours all things in interrelationship, and as such the ‘economy of spirit’ is one of relational value – where everything that exists is honoured as it is, not for what it can do for us (Mitchell, 2004). For example, one man visited my mother one day and asked her, what is your religion? She simply asked him to turn and face the sunset. They turned, and looked at the amazing reds and ochres of the setting Australian sun over the red dirt and gums of the inner West of New South Wales. She said, ‘This is my religion’. Her statement, and her teaching, is both symbolic and instructional. She was teaching through relationship, by example, and in sharing an intuition of the story of creation.
The values and economy of my family history highlight our being one with the land, the sky, and all that is within.

I believe that there is an additional sixth level of mastery. This level is found in all the others, and transcends them. It is above all a spiritual level of belief, energy and knowledge which is beyond faith. From an Indigenous Dreaming, knowledge of our interrelations is intimate, unquestioned, and ultimate. This knowledge or inner knowing is deeply embedded in identity and comes from our hearts, brains, and spirits. Chief Frank Meuse of Bear River First Nations, in Nova Scotia, Canada, often ends his greetings with a popular phrase ‘All my relations’ (personal correspondence). The phrase is very close to an Aboriginal Australian sense of value, in how we are intimately connected to every rock, tree, and person who occupies the cosmos (Cowan, 1992). Relational learning then, for an Aboriginal person, is totally vital, imperative, and essential. To engage in teaching and learning within systems that separate people from each other, and from the environment based within an economic and materialistic value system, is to cut at the heart of Indigenous identity (Mitchell 2004). In my experience this form of education causes trauma and is violent to Aboriginal people whose
spirits are in relationship with the land and are built up within a relational universe.

It may seem strange to some that I am citing Anthony Robbins, who for many people will represent the height of American materialistic culture, a culture that is itself a product of colorist values of selfishness over all of creation. But from my point of view Robbins also gives thanks for what he has. He wishes to assist others on their path. And he speaks directly to a rather modern day conception of spiritual life that is akin to Indigenous values. For example, Robbins (1991, p.431) believes that, while we are living, we are not limited in identity by our bodies. He believes that some call this weightless identity ‘spirit.’ Robbins, after visiting a morgue, realised the blessings of life, itself a gift, and how fortunate he was with the blessings he had. After this experience he became more aware of others around him, for example those who had physical challenges, and realising even more that he was indeed blessed. I believe that one of the most powerful statements that I have read was by Dyer to Robbins who said, ‘We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience’ (Robbins, 1991, p.431). Robbins also says ‘I believe that our true identity is something that’s indefinable and greater
than anything that's describable. We are soul; we are spirit. Remembering who we really are puts everything into perspective.'

In my Aboriginal experience, once we start to act with the wisdom that we are spiritual creatures we will not get trapped in mind games which divide us from one another (Atkinson, Kennedy & Bowers, 2006). We will have a deep assurance that we are really connected with all of creation. When we realise that, we are connected to all things, parts of our energy/spirit are connected to what we focus on, as noted by Myss (1996, p.224) that

Having faith in an idea commits part of our energy to that idea; having faith in a fear commits a part of our energy to fear. As a result of our energy commitments... our minds, hearts, and lives become woven into their consequences. Our faith and our power of choice are in fact the power of creation itself. We are the vessels through which energy becomes matter in this life.

Therefore we need to find out what motivates us to make the choices we do and if we have faith in our fears or in the Divine, no matter how we see the Divine as God or Creator Spirit (Myss, 1996). If we trust and move forward in believing in the Divine with faith, we will be able to move more freely in gaining the desired outcome but if we remain in fear we come away from
our commitments and we never see the fruits of our labour. Likewise, how teachers internalise and manifest their beliefs affect directly the development of the educational environment and, by extension, the inner development of children. We are what we learn and as such what we learn affects who we become.

I have had to work on changing self-defeating behaviours, grow emotionally, develop sound relationships and make my life work financially and time productive while I have undertaken study to become learned while walking my spiritual walk. The reader is invited to visit a more personal narrative on change, in chapter 4 ‘Building a strong house,’ on pages 105-110. We all have the opportunity to make our time here on earth count.
A New Way of Learning

Each of us inevitable; Each [sic] of us limitless; Each of us with his or her right upon the earth; Each of us allow’d the eternal purports of the earth; Each of us here divinely as any is here (Whitman cited in Robbins 1992, p.432).

In changing limiting personal beliefs we have the opportunity to advance our awareness of education in cultural contexts. This will likely impact in positive ways on our work with students – if only to offer teachers more choices based in their increased cultural awareness. This implies that we are engaging in ‘new’ ways of learning or more to the point – new ways of thinking about learning and new ways of orienting our practice to learning. In the previous section I have used the contexts of Indigenous education and equity as examples of areas where teachers can be challenged to undertake new awareness and new orientations to teaching and learning. This section will explore learning disabilities with the same intentions of opening up dialogical spaces where we can re-consider teaching and learning.
If we take the opportunities that present themselves in life we will inevitably fulfil our dreams and ambitions whether they be educational, artistic, spiritual or a simple business adventure. This is how we develop our abilities to the fullest potential by taking the opportunities which present themselves in the school environment. As Kirk (cited in Lyon et al, accessed on the 6 January 2006) states, through the re-designing of educational policies new opportunities present themselves. These policies appeared because of new terms such as ‘learning disability.’ In 1962, the term ‘learning disability’ appeared as a general term that encompassing several areas including dyslexia, word blindness, dysgraphia and dyscalculia which affect learning, communication, language, speech, writing, spelling and/or arithmetic (Kirk cited in Lyon et al, accessed on the 6 January 2006).

Parental and professional advocacy in 1969 led to the introduction of special educational programs for those who had a ‘learning disability’ (Kirk cited in Lyon et al, accessed on the 6 January 2006). The authors suggest that this new term gave parents, teachers and policymakers a new understanding that the mainstream educational environment and the policies that had been put into place in the past were in fact not meeting the needs of children who had
other forms of learning difficulties, such as sight or auditory problems, emotional disturbance, and who were developmentally delayed.

This new awareness led to the need for a new school educational policy for those who came under the umbrella of having a ‘learning disability.’ Kirk also suggests that the term ‘learning disability’ generated new educational policies which supported the creation of new programs in mainstream schools. This provided parents, teachers, educators, and children who had a learning disability, with an educational service which would meet their individual learning styles and needs.

By understanding learning disabilities, as an educator I am aware that teachers, educators and parents gain new hope, optimism and a belief that new educational services can be developed that specialise in working with children who have learning disabilities and who were challenged by mainstream education. In learning about ‘disability’ as a different learning style, I not only reframed the meaning of disability but also realised that children learn in different ways and could learn given the right educational environments and programs. Like other minority experiences, rather than blaming the student or the Aboriginal person the onus is now placed on
educators to change their style of teaching to enable the student with special needs to excel. For example, the implementation of IQ tests have needed to be critiqued when used with students with learning disabilities. As Lyon et al (accessed on the 6 January 2006) states,

IQ achievement discrepancy, when employed “inappropriately” as the primary criterion for the identification of LD [learning disability], may well harm more children than it helps. Not only do discrepancy formulas differ from state to state, making it possible for a student [child] to lose special education services following a family move, but also reliance on a measurable discrepancy between IQ and achievement makes early identification difficult.

These tests indicate that a student reeds to fail or fall below a certain average before they receive special educational help. IQ tests are really not reliable until a student reaches the age of nine. These forms of test may set up a paradoxical “wait to fail” method (Lyon et al accessed on the 6 January 2006). Through this method the student loses several years of potential help in learning basic skills, knowledge and understanding before they receive special educational services. Lyon, et al (accessed on the 6 January 2006) notes that students who have a learning disability may suffer academic and emotional strains of failure due to ineffective instruction in school. This can result in lifelong devastating consequences in terms of difficulties, in
reading writing and ongoing learning into adulthood. Let us now look more closely at dyslexia.

**Dyslexia the Gift**

Ward (2001) states that dyslexia is only one of several distinct learning disabilities and that this disability is language based. Manifestation of dyslexia surfaces through problems with reading and acquiring proficiency in spelling and writing and is a complex issue. Vloodt & Farmer (2004) suggest that students who have dyslexia may have outstanding creative skills, knowledge and understanding while others will display strong articulation of oral skills. It is implied that students who have dyslexia exhibit other strengths of character, outstanding talents and strengths in creative and practical arts, cooking, gardening and carpentry.

Ward (2001) also states that dyslexia is a result of the brain’s organisation of information. Vloodt & Farmer (2004) say this causes difficulties in writing, maths, reading spelling and/or speaking. Ward (2001) notes that regardless of these difficulties those who have dyslexia are of average to superior intelligence. These students can also have amazing gifts and talents in
visual-spatial skills. Students who display both abilities and difficulties can be confusing for teachers and parents.

There are three main types of dyslexia. These are dysgraphia (motor), dysphonesia (auditory), and dyseidesia (visual) (Ward, 2001). Some students who have dyslexia are sensitive to artificial light. Ward also notes that this is known as ‘scotopic sensitivity syndrome,’ or Irlen syndrome, and can be due to a magnocellular defect within the eye and brain of the person who has dyslexia. Dyslexia can cause lifelong challenges in the areas of speaking, spelling, reading and writing but if students experience effective early intervention programs they will make progress in educational endeavers (Vloodt & Farmer, 2004).

Ward (2001) suggests that anatomical evidence shows the brain of the person who has dyslexia is in fact symmetrical and therefore different to the brain of a person who does not have dyslexia. A non-dyslexic has an asymmetrical brain in which the left side is larger than the right. It is most likely that the brain of the dyslexic person processes information differently and linguistically but in the dyslexic’s brain the right side is just as large as the left. This means that there are more connections of neurons in places
where they usually do not connect, thereby causing the process of organizing information and language to be different. Ward (2001, p.14) also notes that it is a mistake to think individuals who are dyslexic are slow learners. In fact they learn differently and their IQ ranges from above average to that of being gifted.

For people with dyslexia, the two hemispheres are symmetrical... the left hand side of the brain is... sequential, and linear thinking prevalent in reading and writing, dyslexics tend to have problems in these areas. However... the right side of the brain is... intuitive, creative, and visual thinking, dyslexics tend to be favoured in this domain. This visual “thinking” ability also translates not only into quantity but also quality. Dyslexics see in 3-D. When looking at an object, they can view it simultaneously from different perspectives. This is good for creativity, but bad for reading. If you look at a pencil upside-down, it is still a pencil. If you look at the letter “p,” it becomes a “b” or a “d.” This shifting of visual vantage points can give the impression that letters are literally jumping (Ward 2001, p.14).

It is not only the visual system that can be affected. The auditory system can also be affected, more specifically in phoneme awareness. For example, Ward (2001, p.15) states ‘...the word “cat” consists of three phonemes: “kuh,” “aah,” and “tuh.”’ The author says this becomes difficult for the person who has dyslexia as the spoken language is learned naturally, but how can someone learn this if the sounds are not corresponding with the
letters. In addition, gross motor movement is also affected by having dyslexia. Thus conventional or mainstream learning styles do not facilitate learning for those who have dyslexia. So ‘conventional education may be substantially weeding out many of those who might have the most to give’ (West cited in Ward 2001, p.17). It becomes necessary to throw out our misconceptions and implement the correct teaching techniques, as many dyslexics have the ability to perceive three dimensionally. This ability results in a very different perception of two-dimensional language and mathematical symbols, such as letters, being confused with other letters, sounds misheard and misinterpreted. Correct intervention can help the dyslexic who has difficulties with vision, hearing, time, balance, coordination and movement distortions (Vloodt & Farmer, 2004, p.33).

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion highlights my motivation to reflect on dyslexia as a learning disability, and on experiences of Aboriginality in the contexts of mainstream schooling. This process highlights minority experiences as a way to critique and to improve educational practice. While race is obviously not a disability, its treatment as a social stigma does convey
similar social dynamics such as ignorance, misunderstanding, shame, and the deployment of approaches to learning that may further marginalise students who are ‘unique’ in terms of learning abilities or racial/cultural background.

My cultural background incorporates another form of human giftedness. Aboriginal people possess inherent social and historical qualities as a birthright which together with the land of our Ancestors speaks of a particular ecological and spiritual perspective on culture, education and social life. These meanings of identity in both racial and cultural background, as well as in other innate characteristics which can not be separated from my identity such as dyslexia, raise the question of how mainstream educational policy and classroom practice has historically, and is currently, based in a ‘one size fits all’ philosophy that does injustice and causes additional layers of trauma for minority students. In contrast to this troublesome reality, my identity and purpose in life is to highlight the positive learning, growth and healing involved in, not only surviving mainstream education, but also in going further by changing my relationship to learning over time. The following discussion circles back upon Aboriginal Australian issues and takes up these themes in greater depth.
Chapter 2

Spirituality and culture: Literature review

A Spiritual Cultural Context from a Historical Perspective

This chapter explores the areas of spirituality as a form of cultural meaning, teachings of culture, family and tribal law. These aspects are shared in light of the limitations of my personal experiences, learning and knowledge. Part of this context is to name the origins of my insight, and thus to honour cultural knowledge and its sources, while also basing the discussion on an Indigenous sensibility in research (Battiste & McConoghy, 2005). These insights apply to the field of education in a broad and non-specific manner, so the reader is asked to suspend questions about how the information ‘applies’ to education while engaging in the discussion of culture. Later in the thesis (particularly chapter 5), these questions of educational implications will be explored in greater depth.

In the 1830’s until the 1840’s, European Missionaries were involved in Evangelical Christian campaigning while the onslaught of removal, hostility and depopulation of Indigenous peoples of New South Wales was
experienced (Mitchell, 2004). Missionaries aimed at the conversion of Aboriginal people to Christianity. In later times, missionaries who came from an intellectual background believed that while the removal affected Aboriginal people who continued to hold colonial ideas they also believed that the possession of Christianity was a compensation for Aboriginal people’s loss of land and independence. As Mitchell (2004) notes, not only were custodial rights taken away, it was culture, identity and spirituality that were damaged. While the missionaries took a superficial interest in Aboriginal spirituality, they also believed that Aboriginal people were degraded and that Aboriginal spirituality was full of superstition and even demonic (Mitchell, 2004). Clearly, Aboriginality was seen as a lower form of culture and spirituality and these parts of the Australian heritage were not embraced or understood by European invaders.

As Harris (1990, p.24-25) states, Europeans believed that Aboriginal people were not quite human. The invaders reassured themselves about their own sense of superiority by referring to their own Christian traditions, culture and beliefs. Harris notes that their religion (that is the Gospel message of Jesus of Nazareth) was intimately conflated with Eurocentrism. That is, there was no objectivity during the colonial invasion to critique the harsh treatment of
Aboriginal peoples as contradicting the inherent message of Christianity. Those few missionaries who raised their voices against the killing of Aboriginal people, the dispossession of their lands, and the taking away of their rights and freedoms, were quickly silenced by the politics of *terra nullius*. The ‘savages’ were seen as sub-human, degraded and deformed, and this made it easier for European families to deny the rights of the ‘Aborigines of Australia’. As Cowan (1990, p.2) notes, Aboriginals were pushed into giving up their old ways, abandoning their totems and rituals, and stopping their ‘nomadic’ ways. Europeans see Aboriginal people as being nomadic, meaning no home, but in fact Aboriginal people travelled within distinct territories defined by tribal boundaries and had several sacred sites which were travelled between and were/are seen as home and part of our tribal land. The Aboriginal people had to adjust to being one with the emptiness of the material world which was forced upon them by the dominant European culture.

Aboriginal people were only embraced when they started to participate in Christian rituals and public holidays of religious conformity (Mitchell, 2004). This was the first step towards repentance and conversion. A conversion was seen as a powerful change of a past life of sin and an
encounter with God which would involve ongoing soul-searching and a life of evangelisation (Mitchell, 2004). So in fact Aboriginal people had to give up their ‘cultural identity’ and ‘ego identity’ (Corey, 2001, p.102) and embrace a new cultural and spiritual life in order to be accepted (Harris 1990; Mitchell, 2004). This meant that their culture and spiritual identity had to be ‘forgotten,’ or at least repressed, and subjected to the shame of denial and then forgetfulness. This places future generations of youth into a ‘cultural void,’ where it becomes essential to study their history and to reclaim their identity throughout a life-long learning process.

To be accepted, my paternal Grandmother married and became Catholic leaving her Indigenous culture and history behind her; but she still had her stories which were embedded into her spiritual being. She felt forced to deny her Australian Aboriginality. In my Grandmother’s words she said, ‘I am Maori,’ and holding up a picture of herself dressed in an islander’s dress and standing in front of palm trees - this was her evidence of being a New Zealand Islander, an identity that was safer than being a local Aboriginal. This is a recollection from my childhood.
How has Aboriginal Identity and Spirituality been 

Affected?

In my cultural understanding identity and spirituality are the same. As Mathews (1994) suggests, Australian Wiradjuri tribal traditions do not separate identity from ecology, local environments, and The Dreaming stories that draw together the linguistic traditions and the collective beliefs of the people. This is similar to other Indigenous traditions, for example, Herman Michell (2006) writes from the Reindeer Lake Woodlands Cree tradition of Northern Canada. He suggests that the worldview of Indigenous people is intimately linked with their epistemology and their relationship with the natural world. Randolph Bowers (2005a, 2005b) who writes in solidarity with Mi’Kmaq First Nations tradition in Eastern Canada also suggests that Aboriginal identity includes our way of knowing (epistemology) which is, as a base line, a wholistic and inclusive ‘oneness’ with the land, plants and animals, spirits and energies within all things, and people. Because of the depth of integrity of the worldview that Aboriginal people have in our traditions, we feel our having been violated by colonising and indoctrinating influences involved in ‘mainstream’ and ‘oppressive’
beliefs even more so. In other words, these forces have cut at the very heart of our identity and must be more adequately addressed in our healing and de-colonising of the fields of education.

I have already established in the above paragraphs that, European invaders did not see Aboriginal people as being civilised, nor as warranting human rights. The result of their incorrect assessment was that Aboriginal people were driven off their land. It was not until 1976 that this injustice began to be addressed by legislation through the Aboriginal Lands Rights Act and the Native Title Act (NTA) of 1993, which have now recognised the importance of sacred sites and custodial land rights (Board of Studies, 2002). By the recognition of sacred sites and custodial lands through NTA, in one sense Australian Aboriginal spirituality has begun to be respected by the legal structures of mainstream Australia. These legislative changes have acknowledged the Aboriginal Dreamtime, referring to all that is known within Aboriginal culture and cosmology (Board of Studies, 2002). Cowen (1990, p.2) refers to the Dreaming as a supernatural reality. The earth is a sacred place, the Creator’s footstool. Aboriginal Australians know that the face of Mother Earth is their ‘Bhagavad Gita,’ in other wards their ‘Torah, Bible, and Koran.’
Likewise, there is also the law of the Aboriginal peoples (Cowan, 1990). This sacred and cultural law governs everything from daily conduct to how one behaves in relation to the tribe or group. In my experience, the tribal law provides the explanation of life on this planet and provides an ethic that guides our relationships to all living creatures. Our law is based in our connections with the land which has shaped the belief system of the Aboriginal peoples. In this way, traditional law governs family, social and educational endeavours by providing an ethical and moral framework for human life, meaning, and relationship. The additional elements of The Dreamtime are the artworks, stories, songs, paintings, sacred objects and the ceremonies (Board of Studies, 2002).

From the colonisation of the 1880s until the 1940s, protection and segregation of Aboriginal people was conducted by the Missionaries. Aboriginal people who resisted the missionary impact had their food rations taken away, they suffered from illnesses and their spirituality and beliefs were worn away by forceful methods (Board of Studies, 2002). These practices took away the Aboriginal peoples’ independence with the land and knowledge of the bush which had been handed down from generation to
generation. Their laws and ways of life had been worn away, setting up the system of dependency, fear and intimidation. As Howitt (cited in Harris 1990, p.181) powerfully states,

Colonisation has touched all parts of the globe... peopling new lands, and everywhere we have found [the colonisers] the same – a lawless and domineering race, seizing on the earth as if they were the first-born of creation, and having presumptive right to murder and dispossess all other people. For more than three centuries we have glanced back at them in their course, and everywhere they have had the word of God in their mouth and the deeds of darkness in their hands.

Likewise Harris (1990, p.634) notes that, when it was apparent on the part of the invaders that Aboriginal people were not dying out, it was determined by the governors of the Europeans that they should be assimilated into white society. Colonisation used forceful methods, which become intrusive to the point where Aboriginal people were being assimilated into ‘white culture’ by force (Board of Studies, 2002). For example, children were being taken away from their parents and then placed into white families.

These horrible perceptions of Aboriginal people did not shift greatly over time and it was not until the 1980’s that we saw more widespread changes in mainstream prejudice in line with new policies that encouraged Aboriginal
self-management in their own affairs (Board of Studies, 2002). In the 1990’s there was a substantial growth in Aboriginal organisations which has helped Aboriginal people to reclaim cultural identity, spirituality identity and self-identity (Corey, 2001).

**Embracing and Healing of Identity through Spiritual Truth**

The following Dreamtime narrative embraces Aboriginal spirituality in the context of a fractured landscape, where many people are attempting to touch base with their Aboriginal heritage in a post-colonial circumstance. By ‘post-colonial,’ I mean that colonialism has not ended by any means but that we are currently in a colonial space that is somehow different from the invasion time of our collective histories in Australia. This information is written in the oppressor’s English language, another indication of the fractured cultural space that now exists.

In my experience, we are searching out our heritage and calling on this energy to assist in today’s healing (education, social change, economic
advancement). The intention is to be heard and to create a new Aboriginal
dialogue, so that not only Aboriginal people understand the Dreamtime
narrative methodology, but also that Anglo-Australians can begin to
appreciate and to support Aboriginal culture as a great source of cultural and
spiritual wisdom. The Dreamtime narrative is used as a bridging and a
connection between the past, present and future which are united within
information from the Dreamtime.

The following story calls upon Aboriginal spiritual and cultural stories to
contextualise meaning and calls forth a deeper spirit of cultural respect and
honour. Part of the source for the story below comes from Crocker (accessed
9-Nov-2005). The fact that this source is from the internet and was not
referenced from its original in a way that clearly identified its place of
origin, tribal affiliation, and family background, adds a very contemporary
sense of the fractured but healing nature of Aboriginal and Indigenous
culture. The story that I have co-created also comes from stories I was told
as a child and so incorporates my own family heritage. This includes respect
for the Wiradjuri and Kwiambal traditions. Likewise, as the story has
evolved I acknowledge the input of other Aboriginal people in Australia who
have shared with me their versions of the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming. In
particular, I am grateful to the story of Pat Mamanyjun Torres, of Broome, Western Australia, whose story came to me orally via Randolph Bowers during 2006 and to Judy Atkinson, who shared insights about the Black Swan and the creation of what is known as the constellation of the Southern Cross.

It is also noted here that Pat Torres shared from her research into the oral traditions and dreaming songs of various tribes that in times of trouble the tribal elders responsible for the songs (songs are the ritualised stories in this context, as most stories are sung in traditional culture) would take the song and its associated dance to a neighbouring tribe for safekeeping. Pat suggested that this occurred during the pearling crisis for the Kimberley tribes who live in what is now Broome, who took certain songs inland into the desert for safekeeping. Thus we learn from each other and neighbouring tribes often share a co-responsibility for the Dreaming stories, ritual and dance that is unique from place to place, but that also shares certain elements in common. As these stories are told from the past and in the present moment, they create the future.

In the Dreamtime nothing was moving, nothing was breathing. All of creation lay within the earth, all lay sleeping under the crust; but one day the crust broke
open and the Rainbow Serpent awakened from her slumber moving up through the earth with colours, moving rock and earth as she went. This was how the opal colours of my totem were formed. The Rainbow Serpent moved over the earth creating valleys and rivers. In some lands, she created sky, in others deep valleys, dry sandy deserts, wetlands, and deep and dark forests. In some places she moved below the ground, and created water holes and water tables to sustain those lands. All around Australia, the Rainbow Serpent moved in and out of the land, sea, air and earth creating the places as she went.

The Rainbow Serpent then called out to the fish and frogs. As they came to her she tickled their bellies and when they laughed the waters filled the valleys and rivers and life came from the earth. The grass, trees, and gums grew, and the animals and reptiles awoke, and they all followed the Rainbow Serpent as she passed through that country. She is the Mother of life and they travelled and reproduced all over the land.

In other places, The Rainbow Serpent called out to the eagle, kookaburra, and other birds, and the sky was created with clouds as they flew in that country, and from their flight the black swan created the stars in the form of the Southern Cross that we see today.

Therefore, all around Australia the Rainbow Dreaming created other Dreaming. And certain stones tell a story, and this or that water hole tells a story. It was placed in the hearts of the people, who themselves were formed from the bones of the tail of that Serpent. And that is another story. There are spaces that were and continue to be very sacred places, where the Dreaming is felt to be concentrated into a particular geography. These became sacred sites, where various ritual and ceremony was held in honour of our Ancestors who are dreaming us while we dream them.
It was at the same time that certain men and women were given their totems and called upon to make rain, or sun, or stormy weather. These singers were given dances and ceremony, and special ones given the powers to heal or to harm, because they upheld the law of the Dreamtime. These Dreamtime Ancestors gave the different peoples their individual laws that govern family, marriage, ritual, and respect. They wrote themselves into the landscape, and people today know their names and the laws that were passed down from that time until today.

In this particular time, I write the song of my own Dreaming that calls out to me: ‘We are red dirt people, we are red dirt people, we are red dirt people, and we’re coming home.’

In the retelling of the ancient Aboriginal Dreamtime story, the Rainbow Serpent was a feminine energy and is the Creator of all life and represents the eternal regeneration. All life begins with her and followers her direction. In the Hebrew biblical story the serpent is seen as a masculine energy, and is less than divine (Eisler, 1995). Rather than a serpent, this creature is depicted as merely a snake, which represents the devil incarnate. Indeed, this image often represents the demonisation of the feminine because the snake tempted Eve in the garden of Eden (Eisler, 1995). The evil snake is condemned to slither and eat the dust of the earth as a form of humiliation. Likewise, the snake is often depicted as ‘black’ and so represents the ‘base’ or less-than-civilised nature of Indigenous peoples in Western Christian
mythology. As Eisler (1995) suggests, the image of the snake is used as a form of demonisation and oppression of non-European forms of culture, sexuality and race.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the woman is deceived by a snake which encouraged the woman to eat of the forbidden fruit (Genesis chapter 3, v. 1-16 NIV). The snake was used as the vessel to tempt Eve. When Eve ate the fruit, Eve came to an understanding of good and evil, and through this evil entered the human race. This story tells of the woman becoming eternally subordinate to her husband through childbirth, the consequence of her condemnation. But in the Dreamtime story it tells of the Rainbow Serpent as Creator Spirit, Mother of Creation, and the law is shaped on the belief that Aboriginal people look after Mother Earth as all things come from her. Following on this ancient Aboriginal law, in many tribes a matrifocal tradition was supported and all over Australia women’s business was held on a par with men’s business, even though these different spheres represented varying degrees of authority and social status depending on local tradition.

Aboriginals still fight against the European idea that Australia was a ‘Terra Nullius.’ The term is a Latin saying, derived from Roman law, meaning empty land or no man’s land. When considering the Dreaming stories,
nothing can be further from the truth. In fact the land was not empty; it had living symbols of a civilised and profoundly spiritual people. The land had a history, a culture, and a spiritual law, and these governed the unique economy of Aboriginal relations with and among the land and creatures that occupied the land of the Serpent. Aboriginal people still fight the legal, social and spiritual implications of Europeans saying that Australia was an empty land, a no man’s land (Crocker accessed 9 Nov 2005).

**Our Culture and Spirituality is Embedded in the Earth**

Strelein (1998) notes that the Native Title Act (NTA) of 1993 has helped Aboriginal people regain connection, occupation and enjoyment of the land. This implies that there is a physical and spiritual attachment to the land and the land is seen as Mother Earth. Aboriginal spirituality is interwoven into the physical relationship with every living thing. Aboriginal people’s interaction with the earth is respectful. For example, Aboriginal people like to visit land to hunt or gather or just get away from the built environment and to reconnect to country, to feel the stories of their Dreamtime.
The NTA has in part given back the Aboriginal people their right to access custodial lands. This enables some Aboriginal people to have traditional camp fires and makes possible a coming together of tribal relationships, of laws, and of stories, which are told to younger generations of how to hunt, gather, and learn about plants, animals and the Dreamtime stories (Cowen, 1990, p.43). These campfires are also used in reproduction of artefacts; these artefacts are then used to create an alternative business selling to tourists (Strelein, 1998) and developing a cultural independence.

Times have changed and hunting and gathering is not done in the same way as in the past. It is in fact done by the use of travelling in vehicles, using rifles and still using a dog or dingo as traditional hunters, and this is often done with two or more people (Strelein, 1998). The gathering of bush tucker (food) is a major part of life. Children often enjoy finding bush tucker, such as silky pear, flax onions, bush tomatoes, acacia seeds and gum from the trees. People need access to land as they need to collect bush medicine and to continue the teachings of the old ways; to teach valuable bush skills to younger generations, such as names of plants, the care of water holes, the cleaning out of rock pools, soaks and springs (Strelein, 1998).
The care of the land is still done in the old way while travelling and camping. This is the physical management the spiritual management includes sacred rituals which honours the respect and care of the land. The religious ceremonies are carried out at ceremonial sites. If these sites are dishonoured the person responsible will be punished in accordance with tribal law. The person responsible for the site can also be punished, as non-Indigenous law is also responsible for these acts (Strelein, 1998).

**Patriarchal (Father figure) Christian Religion and the Matrifocal (Mother figure) Spirituality of the Dreamtime or belief in Creator Spirit**

Fox (cited in Pacwa accessed 06.01.2006) states that patriarchal/father-based religion has lead to sentimentalism and fundamentalism which focuses on personal salvation or a personal saviour. Fox notes that because of this there is no self-respect, no tolerance of difference, no love for creation, no sense of happiness and no sense of sexual identity or fullness of peace and joy. Fox also suggests that even within the Western Christian mystical tradition
an alternative (and largely suppressed) paradigm of matrifocal/mother and feminine-based theology existed.

Matrifocal spirituality cares for creation, the universe, and is seen as the Grandmother of creation. It is interesting to note that the colonisation of Australia was dominated by the male-power-based side of the Christian tradition, while the invaders abuse of Aboriginal people and the land came out of a deeply repressed rejection of the feminine (Eisler, 1995). It is even more profound to note that even now Aboriginal spirituality and culture holds out messages of reconciliation and healing that mainstream cultures need in the contexts of today’s ecological crisis. Aboriginal people have an outward focus that embraces compassion, justice, harmony with others and all living things. Fox cited in (Pacwa accessed 06.01.06) believes that this is a deep ecumenism which allows people from all religions to come together in mystical reunion.

Myss (1996, p.19) also states that, in the context of spirituality, the ‘mystics are in the world, but not of the world.’ For example, in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Aboriginal spiritual traditions, it is thought that detachment of the physical world awakens mystical experiences of the spiritual world
(Myss, 1996). This is said with caution, as in my experience the notion of ‘detachment’ is not particularly Aboriginal in origin because it is an unnecessary concept for a people whose relationship with the land and sea constitutes the whole wealth of creation in which we are participants, relatives, and one family. Cowen (1990, p.57) refers to the Dream Journey. This leads us to an inward journey which connects us to our totem or ‘spiritual alter ego.’ It is our ‘pilgrimage,’ or in a First Nations sense a ‘vision quest.’ Cowen also makes the connection to that of Christian ritual, such as the ‘recitation of the Stations of the Cross.’ Fox (cited in Pacwa accessed 06.01.06, p.3) notes that he,

...identifies Christ with Mother Earth. For him, Christ’s redemption takes on new meaning and power in the Cosmic Christ context if people see it as passion, resurrection, and the ascension of Mother Earth conceived as Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected, and ascended. Holy Communion is “intimate,” “local,” and “erotic” when it becomes the eating and drinking of the wounded earth.

This implies that all things are connected and that all things should be honoured and respected. This also implies that spirituality connects our authentic relationships, to self, others, Mother Earth and the transcendent. This affects our health, not only on a personal level, but in our interaction
with our communities, tribes, ‘mobs,’ nations, and the world (Jones, 2005). If people have lost their interaction with creation and the earth, they have lost Holy Communion with Christ and Mother Earth.

**Conclusion**

It is important to note how European settlement and the colonisation of Australia impacted on Aboriginal people’s spirituality, belief systems, independence and the dispossession of land. Europeans eroded away Aboriginal identity by using forceful methods to impose their own world, cultural, and religious views. These methods were reinforced by the missionaries, who believed that their ways improved the way of life for Indigenous people. By imposing a new belief system based in a foreign culture, Indigenous people lost their self-identity, cultural identity and spiritual identity, leaving them in a void. It has only been in recent years that Indigenous people have been able to strengthen their identities through the advancement of new polices. The Native Title Act (1993) has reinforced the importance of land (Mother Earth) as part of the spirituality of Aboriginal people. Being recognised as the traditional custodians (carers) of this great land has been important and empowering. The Native Title Act has helped in
giving some Aboriginal people land rights, reuniting a small portion of the land and its rightful carers. In this act alone some Aboriginal people have been able to participate in traditional rituals, and a spiritual ‘Dream journey,’ which reconnects us with our totems, spirituality and, in European terminology, our ‘Bush Church’ place of worship. We are connected and will stay connected. Through this we may learn that all things are connected and that Mother Earth needs our care. As Reed-Danahay (1997 cited in Holt 2003, p.2) suggests, if people have the opportunity to express their autonomy in different ways through different means, then the person/people or community will feel and become connected to their ego-identity, cultural-identity, land, spirituality and rituals. The following chapters will be a detailed explanation of how the personal journey, narratives and lived experiences of the author have been used to compile and to expose the difficulties and implications faced in mainstream educational settings, and the emotional and spiritual challenges which surface.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Method Autoethnography

The method chosen is autoethnography. Reed-Danahay (1997 cited in Holt 2003, p.2) notes that ‘autoethnography is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context.’ Several authors (Deck, 1990, Neumann, 1996, Reed-Danahay, 1997 cited in Denzin & Lincoln 2003, p.209) have argued that autoethnographers look first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experiences. Then they move inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is forever changing, and may resist cultural interpretations. In my case, the thesis structure follows this format by providing two wide-angle analytical chapters first and then moving to a personal narrative that explores the undercurrents of the issues being discussed. As the authors cited above suggest, autoethnographic works are often written in the first person in the form of poetry, stories, paintings, journals, or using social science writing styles. In keeping with this methodology, I have incorporated academic
writing, poetry and a free-form personal narrative style within this research. The authors suggest that texts may include dialogue, emotions, spirituality, self-consciousness, and descriptions of action or embodiment. They may also include relational/institutional stories/narratives which have been affected by history, social structure, and cultural background (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.209). Autoethnographic authors use their life experiences in a culturally appropriate way to look and to reflect on self, and thus to focus more deeply at self-other interactions (Holt, 2003 p.2; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.211).

In retelling lived experiences through story, Travisano (2002, p.123) noted that ethnography is to 'retell lived experiences, to make another world accessible to the reader.' These and similar studies use self to learn about others (Cohen, 1992, Jackson, 1989, Okely, 1992, Turner & Bruner, 1986, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.212). Through exploring my life through experimental writing, poetry, and telling my stories/narratives, I attempt to make my cultural world accessible to the reader as I recount how learning took place in the context of school environments, in everyday life, and between self and others. As Denzin & Lincoln (2003, p.211) suggest,
In native ethnographies, researchers who are natives of cultures that have been marginalised or exoticized by others write about and interpret their own cultures for others.

Halley (2002, p.91) noted that autoethnographers enter into an exploration of a nonlinear, repetitive kind of knowing, speaking and writing about their world in ways that challenge and complement traditional sociological ways of understanding society. In my case, the nonlinear, repetitive and spoken is expressed in a circular style of learning and writing which revisits topics after shifting into other areas and which comes back at a topic from a different, slightly more integrated perspective. My study is an experimental sociological piece of writing that explores trauma, in which I try to put words to my memories. From my understanding of these methods, autoethnographic writing allows the reader to be able to become immersed into the text and to feel the dilemmas that I have faced in my life; it helps the reader to identify with the stories/narratives instead of objectifying the issues of disabilities and marginalisation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.203). This style of writing invites the reader to become actively involved in the discussions that describe an autoethnographic journey. Autoethnographic writing engages the reader in personal stories/narratives which provoke the
reader to think about their own story as something worth telling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Denzin & Lincoln (2003, p.213) note,

The primary purpose is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context. In personal narrative texts, authors become “I,” readers become “you,” subjects become “us.” Participants are encouraged to participate in a personal relationship with the author/researcher, to be treated as co-researchers, to share authority, and to author their own lives in their own voices. Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author’s world, evoked to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives.

**Process of Deciding on Topic**

The following highlights the chronological development of the methodologies that I explored and that helped me to make the decision in using autoethnography. First, during the early stage of the research I explored grounded theory, given the suggestions of several colleagues who had previously used the method. Grounded theory is based on the notion that the researcher is informed by the narratives and data that are collected from other people, and is ready to make decisions about individual pieces of data that have been collected according to a thematic analysis that recognises the
'plausible relationships proposed among the concepts and sets of concepts' (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.278 cited in Huehls, 2005, p.330). I felt that I needed to explore this method for a time, and so I formulated questions that might guide the research if I decided to actually collect data from other sources. At the time, my interests were in looking at exploring life coaching applications, to help teachers facilitate learning in minority groups. I was hoping to explore how teachers use creative expression with adult learners and why motivational learning occurs. These aims involved exploring life coaching applications, to help others to learn through creative expression. I was also very interested in exploring life coaching applications through the use of creative arts, as my own Indigenous experience has used the creative arts extensively in personal work, as well as in teaching and learning.

These questions focused on teaching, life coaching, and creativity, and how different techniques can facilitate and motivate learning. However, I decided that this approach was too positivist and came from a place of knowing, rather than unknowing. My questions had embedded in them too many assumptions about life coaching, creativity, and how learning occurs.
Second, I explored phenomenology. As Atkinson (2005) states, ‘...[phenomenology] concentrates on the study of human consciousness and the objects of lived experiences.’ I was interested in this field of research because it had a focus on doing research on issues of meaning and culture, and my focus was increasingly moving to issues of Aboriginality. In this way, I was looking at Aboriginality as a form of identity, cultural significance, and meaning. As such, I have incorporated phenomenology as one of the more general frames of reference that support the current study – however, I have chosen to see the broad application of phenomenology as a philosophy within the authoethnographic approach finally undertaken.

Third, I then explored phenomenographic research. This focuses on a form of learning that strives to take the perspective of the learner, and from that perspective describes the variations in the ways in which the central phenomena is understood and experienced (Marton & Booth, 1997 cited in Booth 2001, p.1). This form of research interested me because it gave me the opportunity to look and observe the ‘object’ of research, which was the person or people under study, and the ‘subject’, which was the way in which learning and meaning were experienced and conveyed. This also interested
me because it allowed me to map out conceptually the ideas of the research – that is, the ‘graphic’ nature of the phenomena became the focus of analysis. As I began to map out the underlying parts of the research that motivated me the most, it became clear that my focus was on an emerging sense of identity and how this related to my (a) learning history, and (b) cultural experience. It was the phenomographic methodology that led me to discover and embrace a personal study of my lived experiences, so I then looked at doing an autobiographical study.

Fourth, it was then that I began to explore autobiographical research as defined by Duke University (accessed on 2-06-2006) as a reflection which ‘...requires you to consider events and experiences in your life and analyse them in the context of topics or themes relevant to a particular course or academic subject.’ Autobiography is the sharing of one’s life story, development and/or history from a personal perspective. From my point of view, this method was too limited because it did not acknowledge enough the cultural and ethnographic parts of my life experience. It was then that I finally settled on an autoethnographic study. Jenks (2002 cited in Smith 2005, p.4) shares an experience of authoethnography,
My experiences undoubtedly have affected what I observed, what I wrote, and how others will interpret and react to what I wrote. Therefore, in the end, it was inescapable that I chose to use autoethnography as my method. By definition, autoethnography enabled me to tell the story of my life-changing experiences ... my views, thoughts, and story ... using autoethnography permitted my experiences to play a valid role in the study, because the genre includes the researcher as a participant.

I had a desire to understand how learning happens and what better way to understand than to focus on my own way of learning. Autoethnography gave me the opportunity to do a self-exploration study and an analysis of my life’s journey. I felt that this was something that needed to be explored and by looking at what happened to my learning while at school I was able to see who influenced my learning and who didn’t, and how this played out in specifically cultural and historical contexts.

Deciding to do an autoethnographical study made sense as this method permitted me to access and to express my lived experiences and to explore self and others. Making the decision to become both the author/researcher and the researched gave me the opportunity to relive my life experiences and to focus on the areas that interested me as a learner, teacher and counsellor. This type of reflection and self-analysis helped me to see how my learning
developed in the school environment and has affirmed how important it is to me as a teacher that my students receive the best possible outcome in learning. It has also helped me as a counsellor to see how important it is for a client to receive the opportunity to heal and to recover from life difficulties and traumas. Focusing on my own life stories has helped me to affirm the philosophies that I hold about making sure those students/clients receive a positive outcome to learning and to encourage them to change negative embedded beliefs.

**Process of Going into the Spiral**

I envisaged the process of writing an autoethnography as a spiral process. Please see Figure 3.1 for a graphic representation of the spiral. This process involves special awareness and time-based awareness. I now look at autoethnography as a spiral, in part because I needed to travel back and relive and reflect on my life to retrieve my stories and spiritual narratives and then put meaning to what had happened to me.

As I travelled back I noticed that this experience incorporated intense emotional responses as an adult when I looked at the abuse that I went
through as a child. These relived experiences were shared with my mother, supervisor, and mate, who gave me the opportunity to tell my story verbally. This helped me to travel through each stage of the narratives that I accessed.

Figure 3.1

The spiral was challenging when I was asked by the process to access feelings and emotions in relation to my education, spirituality, and cultural identity. But this emotional healing was essential to understand and to address the experiences and places where my past experiences of trauma had made me bound, and which pulled my energy back outside of the present moment to another time when healing needed to occur. The spiral called me
back to then, and then to myself now, and through this awareness of healing through sharing my stories I came to understand an essential part of Aboriginal stories – that our stories are our medicine (Atkinson, Kennedy, Bowers 2006).

It was only then that I was able to take the learning into a written context. Writing this thesis has given me the opportunity to affirm my authentic self. Tisdell (accessed 6 May 2006, p.3) believes this to be the ‘authentic identity… I think that spirituality is to know who you are, and to be able to define who you are, wherever you are, despite the changing conditions of your life.’ Each time I travelled back I was able to understand what had happened during my education. This is now such a strong part of who I have become. This assisted me to have a true sense of my spirituality, and to realise that my Aboriginal cultural identity is also essential to who I am and to who I am becoming. In this I recall a story of a small Aboriginal boy who was drawing spirals in the sand. He looked up and said, ‘Come home, come play with me.’ It came to me later, through this exploration that in many Aboriginal cultures around Australia the spiral has special significance. In certain places, it is a symbol of the sacred feminine as Dreamtime Serpent and is symbolic of women’s business (Pat Torres, Broome, WA, orally
conveyed to me via Randolph Bowers, 2006). In other places it is symbolic
of birth, life, death, and rebirth, and of the cycles of the seasons and seasonal
migration patterns (Mathews 1994). These and other deep-genetic cultural
associations suggested to me that the process of autoethnographic research
was calling back my spirit and showing me over time the parts of myself that
needed reclaiming.

Process of Coming out of the Spiral

Each time that I went into the spiral and retrieved information, observed it
and surfaced again, this process helped me to realise that I had broken the
cultural norms that had silenced my cultural voice and spiritual identity for
years. Tisdell (2001, p.1) stated that spiritual awareness is becoming more of
a daily occurrence for many people. This is breaking the cultural norms that
seem to have silenced our passion for spirituality. Coming out of the spiral
and seeing my experiences as an adult has helped me to piece together my
spiritual learning journey. My spirituality seems to be deeper than the
religious experiences of the church school that I had attended. It was more
about my personal beliefs in my cultural identity and my Higher Power.
Vella (2001 cited in Tisdell 2001, p.1) suggested that ‘attending to the
spiritual dimension of adult learning is part of honouring the learner as “subject,” and thus the author of her/his own life in the quest for meaning-making.

By coming out of the spiral I was making meaning of my experiences. I was able to see a bigger picture of how I had become resilient, optimistic, and committed to my spirituality, and how these parts have remained throughout my adult life.

Wilber (2000 cited in Tisdell 2001, p.2) argued that individuals develop spiritually over time. He suggested that spiritual development unfolds in overlapping and interweaving ways ‘resulting in a meshwork or dynamic spiral of consciousness unfolding.’ Each level included and expanded on the development of earlier stages and moved to greater integration. In a similar way, exploring each level of development and coming out of the spiral has helped me to move towards a life which has integrated all of the parts of who I am. In my deeper conceptions of these methods, I intuit an Indigenous approach to research that comes from Aboriginal culture rather than being imposed upon Aboriginal people. In most recent readings, these intuitions are being confirmed as I begin to engage with the writings of other
Indigenous researchers who have, unfortunately, not been a part of the evolution of this study (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005).

**Self-Censoring**

I have had to give great thought about what I have chosen to put into my autoethnographical study, and who and what I have chosen to self-disclose within my writings. I have taken into account the hard work that has already been put into my relationships that I so dearly cherish. This is a delicate process. I have had to reflect and take into consideration my family members, extended family and friends who still deal with the difficulties of past generational abuse of their education, spirituality, and state of mind. I have a great responsibility to honour their journeys as part of our collective cultural identity (or tribal law or group collective) as much as I need to honour my own sense of self. As such, I have needed to reflect upon all these issues and the work that goes into building relationships. I could not write without first considering the implications of my words upon those who are close to me. I am honouring myself when I honour and respect those around me. My behaviour and actions can still affect others, no matter if it be verbal or in a written text. I still have the ability to either influence people
around me or cause harm to their growth. Therefore, there was a great deal of self-censoring in writing this thesis. However, this being said, I prefer to look at this censoring as another form of creative expression. In this way creativity is carefully constructing a work of art, such as a thesis, by attending to the central ethical values of one’s culture, family, history, and current circumstances. At the core of these ethical issues is the care and protection of the people in my life, even those who may have intentionally or unintentionally ‘caused harm,’ which can also be reframed in a more positive light by choosing to learn from: life’s challenges.

**Limitations and Implications of the Study**

Limitations in the context of this study relate to the methodological assumptions that the reader may bring. For example, as the study is based in autoethnography, it is an inductive study and does not come from an empirical or deductive approach. If the reader applies the latter perspectives to this study they will conclude that the study is limited by being overly subjective and personal in nature. However, as the study comes from a social constructionist approach based on the analysis of a personal narrative and its
associative cultural data, the so called limitations of the study are in fact its primary strengths.

According to Minichiello (1999, pp.42-43) qualitative research needs to be evaluated by four criteria. First we need to consider whether or not the study takes into account the personal, social, historical, cultural and present circumstances. In other words, the strength of this study lies in how my personal narrative speaks to the social and cultural context that has impacted on me. This same context may also encourage creative and/or critical analysis by others who have shared similar and/or quite different circumstances. Likewise, under this criteria the study may be limited in how my time constraints have necessarily focused my writing in my limited knowledge of how my story fits within an ongoing and evolving social history. In other words, my limited awareness at the time necessarily speaks from a local voice, and is limited by my body of knowledge. Furthermore, if I wrote this study ten years from now or if someone with similar personal and social issues wrote their reflections with similar guidelines, the outcome may involve similar themes but the details could be quite different.
Secondly Minichiello (1999, pp.42-43), suggested that qualitative research should demonstrate ethical sensitivity. In this study cultural ethics have been applied to the questions of identity and issues of difference by limiting the focus of analysis to personal narrative. This focus on my story in the context of my family and my Aboriginal culture was the most appropriate way to share my learning and reflections from an Indigenous perspective in the study. This approach relies on personal and cultural wisdom and its strength is based in the ethic of care. This ethic has led me to take a “personal” rather than an “objective” approach to my culture and family life. Within this ethic, the limitations relate to the necessary local and contextual character of the story. How each person relates this narrative to wider issues is unique, and how they believe that it speaks to social implications is also unique.

Thirdly Minichiello (1999, pp.42-43), suggested that research ought to demonstrate “thick description,” which means to go beyond the obvious and to engage in a more in-depth understanding of culture, history, and interpretations. The merit of such description is to enable the reader to share a window into the life experience of the research. In my case, the reader needs to judge if I have succeeded in conveying aspects of one experience of
Aboriginal Australia and minority experiences within the time, space, and other resource limitations of the study.

Lastly, Minichiello (1999, pp.42-43) commented on the need to build rapport between researcher and the participants in the study. From an Indigenous perspective, my study uses rapport in an appropriate cultural understanding of self-disclosure, critical-self-reflection, and sharing of story/narrative as the primary modality of research and social change. Rapport here is a much wider phenomenon than as noted by Minichiello, and includes how my story expresses deep appreciation and respect for family, loved ones, elders and “country.” The rapport here is a synthesis of ancient and modern and holistic spirituality that is motivated by the need for healing and restoration of an Indigenous paradigm unique to Aboriginal and First Nations research (Atkinson, Kennedy, & Bowers, 2006).

Further Research

My original idea can be used in further research. Earlier I was considering using grounded theory. This would have involved having an ethics approval to undertake a study which would involve a sample of eight to ten
participants. This research would have looked at the difficulties that Indigenous Australians and those who have learning disabilities face within the context of school environments and what impact this experience has had on their education. Questions would have been formulated around the participants' educational, spiritual and cultural experiences.

Grbich (cited in Minichiello, et. al 1999, p.129) suggested that the researcher needs to be present as a spectator to examine experiences and gain information about the participant’s meanings, values, definitions, versions, and understandings of their experiences. This shows that the grounded theory approach is particularly useful in fieldwork, where the finer points of interaction provide the focus for the study, and where the processes of meaning construction are important. Grbich (cited in Minichiello, et. al 1999, pp. 129-130) also noted that grounded theory explores definitions, understandings, meanings and actions. This type of study would help define the caring of the human spirit and identify whether the concept of spirituality has relevance in the educational experience.

I note following Minichiello’s (1999) idea of going with possible themes as issues associated with engaging with other people in research, that the
present study has given me his gift in relation to the areas of culture, identity, education and disabilities.

Conclusion

If one thing remains to be said, it would be that I have learned that research is an emerging process. In this way, Indigenous people have always been doing research, and are excellent researchers by knowing their environment and by passing down vital information for survival, for family ritual and law, and for personal wellbeing. As a moment in time, this research takes a snapshot of spiritual, educational and cultural perspectives and this may help others see the value of all cultures and what they have contributed to our rich and resourceful society. The remaining chapters in this thesis focus on personal narrative, and analysis of various issues while facing challenges to spiritual and educational insights.
Chapter 4

Personal Narrative

I would like to welcome you to my life and journey by first of all recognising the traditional custodians’ of this great land Australia, and to honour my ancestors who walked this land and to honour Creator Spirit by maintaining the traditional laws and care of the land. I have travelled physically, mentally and spiritually so please join me in this walk and open your abilities to what is possible.

The following chapter expresses one example of personal narrative. The narrative voice expresses my thought processes, reflections and recollections during the years 2005-2006. The names of various people in this narrative have been changed, and details masked to preserve the privacy of those involved.

I grew up in rural Australia in a large extended family. My paternal grandfather was of Irish/French heritage and he married my grandmother who came from the Kwiambal peoples of Australia. My maternal grandmother was English and she married my grandfather who was from the Wiradjuri tribe. We were looked at as being ‘poor’, although this perception
by others did not do justice to our rich experiences of daily life. More is said about this towards the end of the narrative, but for now let me share with you my early experiences of education.

**Early Educational Experiences**

I attended a Catholic Primary School during grades one to six (ages five to eleven). This is where my belief in God developed, primarily due to the faith practices that I experienced in the Catholic religion. This was my paternal Irish/French Grandfather’s religious and cultural background. He married my Grandmother who came from the Kwimbal peoples of Australia. Her spirituality was The Dreamtime. My maternal Grandmother was European and my maternal Grandfather descended from the Australian Aboriginal Wiradjuri tribe.

While attending the Catholic school, Sister ‘Marria,’ one of the nuns who tutored me in individual lessons in grades five and six, became a great support person who helped me to develop my humility, compassion, values, attitudes and beliefs towards learning and towards others. This was also due to the curriculum being faith-focused.
When Education Fails

After primary Catholic school, during our family travels across Australia, I attended various secondary public schools for four years from the age of twelve to fifteen. The environments generally made me feel as though I needed to be on guard, protecting myself from the harsh words of teachers and students. I did not feel anymore that school had either a religious or a caring environment. I found the environment harsh and this did not assist my learning. Little consideration was taken into account for those who were from a different cultural context or had difficulty in learning. As I had a learning disability, dyslexia, this made the experience all the more difficult.

It was my mother who was a self-taught, self-directed learner. She was an avid reader and gifted with intelligence to do her own research. When she found out about my dyslexia, she read more about the condition and let me know that I was intelligent but someone who learned differently. It was through her insight and love for her own learning that she had been able to assess my learning style and intervene in a more positive way. Knowing that I could face this challenge with her help gave me some sense of assurance.
that the difficulties with my ability to learn were largely based on a legitimate learning disability and that I was not plainly "dumb and stupid" as Mr ‘Axford’ had told me. Mr Axford was one of my secondary teachers who had said I was stupid and implied that my close relatives were also stupid.

Even while facing the so-called ‘disability,’ I was able to rely heavily on my other abilities. For example, I was able to learn through listening to teachers and adults talk. This act of listening helped me become articulate in speech, even though I had a speech impediment in early primary school. Maybe this ability was due to being gifted and talented, as it was subsequently identified even though it was not realised at the time. This meant that I was able to focus my abilities towards verbally articulating complex information back to teachers, even though I had little capacity to understand or to gain knowledge about learning through the written text. While I attended the secondary school I had made the effort to speak with several different teachers about my need for help with spelling and writing. Generally, I was confronted with this reply, ‘We are not here to do that!’ I thought, ‘Well what are you here for?’ I was looking for a mentor to help to learn!
I felt invisible to teachers. Was it just their lack of caring? Was it their imbedded teaching philosophies, beliefs, values and attitudes? Was it just their fears towards learning? Maybe they could not see that all students do not learn in the same way and that the curriculum does hinder different learning styles. I was left floundering or drowning in the world of education.

As the expectations of the educational program increased, my feeling of not being able to cope also increased. There was not sufficient help to enable me to rise to the challenges the curriculum was presenting and teachers were either not capable or, more likely, were unwilling and not interested in providing additional assistance for special learning needs. I was left to my own devices. The experience makes me question the mainstream educational system, and the largely self-serving attitudes of teachers who were unwilling to help and who were also protected by their positions within the system.

Even though I found learning personally confronting, I wanted to go on to year twelve. I was told by my teacher, ‘You are too dumb and stupid,’ and would not have the ability to be able to go on with further education. As a result, I was under the belief that I had to leave school at the age of sixteen.
My teacher had limited expectations of my abilities. He seemed to have a
double standard within his teaching and within the classroom environment,
as he singled out certain students. Over time I noticed that those students he
treated differently might have been seen as lesser. Those who were from
‘poorer’ families, who were not landowners, who had less money or social
status, and who were from different cultural contexts. He regularly
manifested bullying behaviours which became a repetitive pattern for this
teacher. He appeared to get some sort of self-reward, or in some strange way
a high, from berating others with very harsh words and abusive energy.
From these observations of the different ways the teacher treated various
students, it appeared that this teacher seemed to favour students who came
off the land. He himself was a land owner. This class-based attitude was, and
still remains, a powerful inheritance from colonial days that characterises
rural Australia. This level of status somehow made a difference in the way
he would teach individual students and communicate with them.
Facing Limited Choices

When I left school I found it hard at the age of sixteen to find work as my education was fractured, delayed, and I was struggling. It was my father who helped me get a start at an abattoir as he had contacts there.

In not receiving the correct educational interventions to suit my individual learning style, before it was not as though programs did not exist for those who had learning disabilities, see Chapter 1: ‘A new way of learning.’ (pp.36-40), it seemed that the teacher was making more involved effort with those who seemed to come from ‘good stock.’ As I noted at the time, he would send students off to the library to do research and develop their skills in observation and analysis while I was a part of the group who stayed back to copy information off the blackboard. I found this frustrating as I also wanted to learn but it seemed that I would never get that opportunity to do so while in this school environment. This seemed at the time to be another double standard that effectively resulted in a low socio-economic student not being educated enough to change his circumstances in life.
In my circumstances, I really needed to address my poor experiences of education as I was working at an abattoir where I found the slaughter of animals sad, difficult, stressful and frustrating. This was the case for me because I was brought up by my mother to respect animals and all creatures. She was also a volunteer of the RSPCA, and so her strong ethical values of protection of animals was a part of my beliefs as well. In my circumstances, I felt trapped as I had no education to fall back on and no money as I came from a low-socio-economic background. This was a ‘catch 22’ situation as my education had given me no choices to change my circumstances.

People ask me, weren’t you angry? And my response is no, if I was to get angry I would have been hooked into the system as it was then. Rather, I believed that I could eventually change my circumstances. So I reframed these experiences and decided that the income that I was receiving would be used to better my future and my education. For example, while I worked at the abattoir I used the money to enter a study program in another rural town. While this was extremely taxing on my energy, as I could only study at night, and the travel across country was tiring, I was positive and optimistic about my experiences and generally was able to cope with the stressful environments in which I had been placed. I have been asked why this was
the case, it certainly was not learned in school. One of the reasons is that this attitude of hope was innate within me and was largely learned from my mum whose desire to see her children better themselves was a constant motivating force in our family.

When I had started at the abattoir I found that it was my school acquaintances that I would be working with. I thought that this would give me a level playing field, as we were no longer in the school environment. ‘No such luck.’ They had already developed their social groups, of which I was not a part. I felt surprised to be working with people I had gone to school with, and who had achieved high marks, and who seemed to be so talented. These were the people who said, ‘Well you’re here with us Dwayne,’ implying that this is where I would stay forever. The only part that they got right was my name. These were their self-limiting beliefs, which they tried to place on me but which I was not prepared to accept. Where did they get these beliefs? Why were mine different? What beliefs would they have internalised in school? It was as if they lived in a box and I was able to see outside to a wider world of possibilities. Why such a paradox, that the boy with a disability was able to move on? Perhaps my disability actually allowed me to see through the window, so the box that I was also trapped
inside was slowly worn away by peeling off the layers received from peers and teachers. It is powerful to realise that I was also treated differently in the context of this working environment. People my age generally were taking home pay checks for $480.00 a week, while I was taking home $100.00. As I look back I view this as ‘slave labour.’

When confronted with this injustice, I was very upset. But when speaking with my mum, she asked me: ‘What are you doing with your money? And what are all those other guys doing with their money? They are all wasting their money on drinking. But you are saving your money towards a better future.’ I felt that I could do more than work as a labourer for the rest of my life. I was only sixteen and the work was challenging physically, mentally, and spiritually. I wanted to do something different. I never was a part of the social group. I felt like I was a square peg in a round hole all of my life in the rural towns where we lived. The rural town has come to represent dominance and prejudice of one limited way of looking at the world. The history of the values manifested in that place we call rural mainstream Australia is just so layered with engrained and insidious attitudes. I was placed into environments which I found difficult but I believed in one simple truth: that I could learn and change my life and become self directed in my
learning and thinking. I thought, ‘Well I am not at school anymore, and not being controlled by teachers’ influences or words on how to act and participate.’

In Spite of Education

As a result of my motivation to change my life, I undertook a welfare course at a Technical and Future Education College (TAFE) at night, finding the theory and study difficult but completing the requirements and gaining my certificate. While attending this course I had to complete a practicum. I chose to work with those who had developmental disabilities, but only over my Easter break because the abattoir would not give me the time off.

Several months later I was rung by the same organisation and they asked me, ‘Would you like an interview for a position that we have?’ As I reflect back to that moment, I could see my life opening up right before my eyes. I had a strong overwhelming feeling that I would get this position. I recall feeling so blessed that the people in this organisation had recognised my abilities months earlier over the Easter break. I attended the interview and the following day they rang me and said that I had the job. I was so beside
myself, and I had a feeling of acceptance and that my abilities had been seen. I contrast this in my memory of being invisible and a target for harassment in school, and this experience proved to me my belief in changing my circumstances. They said it was due to my honesty as I had mentioned that I found spelling, writing and reading difficult.

This small start at the age of seventeen was only the beginning of my journey. I had worked with the abattoir now for a ten month period and in that time I felt that I had been abused physically, mentally, and spiritually, but I always believed that good would come out of these experiences. We always said we were from ‘struggle town.’ We were all ‘different.’ Part of this learning now is to understand the nature of the harassment/abuse. In a way, this is a life-long process of healing and re-learning, and un-learning. While I was blessed to have inner qualities that shifted to the positive, reframed, and learned by experience, at this time to look back is also about deconstructing the abuse – in school and in the society of the rural town – and the guts of this for me is simply understanding that many people who should have been caring were not, and chose not to be better human beings. Rather than continue to internalise this as my fault, the view I take now is
about acknowledging the shortcomings of others while also forgiving them, and simply moving on with my life.

**Hard Road to Self-Confidence**

Receiving this position one year after leaving school in 1987 gave me the incentive to become even stronger in my decision to become educated and learn. I started to focus on what I wanted and this alone I believed would move me towards gaining the desired outcome. As I worked, I attended work conferences and learned in the context of the job about the needs and life-skills for those who had developmental disabilities. Through this I became much more confident within my own abilities. My self-directed learning moved from strength to strength, and developing short term goals helped me move towards my long term goals. I had to crawl before I could walk, so I completed in 1989 a Bar & Cocktail Certificate, in 1990 a Show-card & Ticket Writing Certificate, in 1992 an Adult Literacy & Numeracy Course, and in 1993 a Computer Studies Course and Childcare Certificate. Knowing my difficulties with learning (and fearing further lack of support from teachers), I started with a course which did not have a large volume of
theory. This helped build my confidence. I achieved these courses while still working and learning in the job which I loved.

Because of my learning outside of the school context in the creative and practical arts, I believed that I could move towards an even higher education. Slowly over time I started to reframe my bad educational experiences and attempted to not live in past circumstances. I believed that circumstances could be changed. I took a glimpse at other people’s experiences and saw how they were able to change their circumstances and their lives. For example, immigrants who wanted a new life not only had to change their circumstances but also their country by adopting Australia as their new home, making it the land of opportunity. They had to learn a new language, culture, and often study to gain work and make an income. This meant so could I! By focusing on how others had demonstrated the courage to change their lives, I was able to change my beliefs, values and attitudes towards learning.

I started to change embedded beliefs, which I had held about myself, such as being “dumb and stupid”. This was extremely difficult, as these words were programmed into my life at such an early age by the very teachers who were
in positions of authority over me, and who I naturally trusted to care for me and my development as was their role. I had to keep on dealing with these issues and just trusted that I could learn by focusing on the positive. Not only did I have to face the internally learned self-defeating behaviour, I had to consider the other confounding variables like my cultural identity, family background, my sense of self, and the fear and uncertainty of going into formal study. The educational system had not prepared me nor helped me to face these very basic life-challenges. I had to reflect on what I was doing in the context of study because it was affecting not only me, but also the people around me in both positive and negative ways.

The major positive influences towards learning at this time in my life were my sister and mother who valued education and believed that learning was a self-motivated process. My mother gave me positive affirmations, for example, she said ‘Hard beginnings make for good endings.’ She confirmed what I was doing was great and always had some additional thought or idea, or suggestion, that might help me to the next step of my learning in life. She possessed amazing practical wisdom. She was a life coach, mentor, and great friend by wanting the best for me. I note that teachers are meant to take on these roles, particularly as they are commissioned by the community to
provide an extension of caring roles based in the family. The system of education has somehow failed this basic social responsibility by changing the roles of teachers into something else – while the real everyday needs of students are overlooked if not outright ignored.

I still struggled with being self-conscious about learning, especially English, reading and spelling, as I received little encouragement in my education. So the initiative primarily had to come from me to offset the negative influences of ‘learning’ in the educational context. Instead of believing that learning was an external process, I believed that it had to become an internal force because no one was going to do it for me. In school, learning happened by the teacher telling you information and often giving you answers. The artificial nature of this form of education did not promote life-long learning. The only way to rectify my education was to get out there and learn in new and challenging ways. Good education is not meant to put up more obstacles, nor to instil negative stereotypes of dumb and stupid. The trauma these influences created provided me with additional trauma to deal with on top of already extremely challenging circumstances – and as I have discussed these experiences with many people over the years it became
apparent to me that this violation of the ethic of care in education in rural Australian society is not unique to my experience.

**Building a Strong House**

In spite of all the negative messages received from teachers, I decided to believe that if others could go to university, ‘Why couldn’t I?’ I kept on telling myself that I would! Even though I was dealing with a past negative association of being told that I was “dumb and stupid” and which was still affecting my mental health and my processes of learning, I believed by repeating a positive affirmation from my Christian upbringing, such as ‘I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me,’ that I could change and improve my circumstances with God’s help. My mindset to learning could become a positive process. But still the psychological signpost of “dumb and stupid” would pop up in front of me, and many self-defeating thoughts would flood my being. From a social historical perspective, the teachers who told me this were an instrument of a much wider system of social control – a system that wanted to keep rural kids, Aboriginal kids, down and out. As long as you stayed down and out, the teachers would not have to be confronted with their responsibility and the social system would continue as
is (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005). I would question myself, ‘Can I do this?’ Believing in my positive affirmation, I went on from TAFE and into university to study teaching. I chose teaching because this was one way to become educated, and to actually learn about learning.

I was still dealing with the fact that I could not really spell, ‘But I made it!’ ‘I am here with everyone else! Finally my dream is a reality! Scary, but a reality!’ I was so excited and wanted to learn even though I felt that everyone in the lecture theatre could see me, and were looking over my shoulder making their judgments of my abilities. Even now, these past feelings of shame and guilt follow me, challenging my writing, spelling and reading. ‘I faced life full on,’ by really challenging myself, abilities, beliefs and spirituality, I wanted to do a teaching degree. I thought, ‘What better way to understand education and learn?’ I stayed focused and told myself that I was able to do this. Positives continued to come from my mother, sister, sister in-law and aunt. It is interesting that all were female figures, and all people who exercised their responsibility in their caring role with love and concern for my wellbeing.
With their support, I made it through my first year in 1994 seemingly gaining the respect of two lecturers: one in religious studies and the other in society and culture. They both believed that I had the ability to do well in my studies, and I was advised to steer clear of students who were not genuine about learning. The metaphor that one of the lectures gave me was he saw me as a house. ‘The foundations were down and the walls were being built,’ he said, ‘Don’t fall to the wayside as a lot of these students will.’ He went on to say that he would like to see a roof and windows in this house. Having gained the respect of this lecturer, I not only wanted to prove to myself and family that I could learn, but also to honour this powerful metaphor and the lecturer who had spoken it. The metaphor opened up new space, indeed, created a whole new house in which I could live. Contrast this with the personal stab of a statement like, ‘You are dumb and stupid, and won’t amount to anything!’ It is shocking how easily teachers can destroy hope. It is equally amazing how easily teachers can offer a kind word, and creatively share a metaphor or story that opens up the mind and heart of a student whose whole life could be inspired by one comment.

The other lecturer I also found amazing. She reminded me of one of the teachers that I had in primary school who respected me, Sister Marria, an
angel I’m sure, who helped me out in years Five and Six. This lecturer was very much the same but maybe a little tougher than Sister Marria, but then again I was taking responsibility for my education and I am sure that she could see the potential in me. She was tough, saying to me that I could do better in my assignments even if I did have a learning disability (dyslexia). This belief also gave me inspiration to do well in learning. I felt as though I had gotten my wish of having mentors even if it was years later. I felt that people really wanted to see the best from me as a student who was genuine about learning. My work improved slowly over the weeks and months, but I still needed support from my lecturers. I needed a mentor who could and would coach and show me how to write academically, present assignments, and read and apply theory to my work.

I needed a mentor/tutor while in my Bachelor of Teaching and that is when ‘Deb’ came into my life in 1995, the second year and second semester of my teaching degree. She taught me how to develop my writing academically and focus on the task at hand. I was also able to see a specialist who assessed people who had learning disabilities. As I was now working full-time, I had enough money to arrange testing. The testing confirmed that I had dyslexia, as my mother had already assessed. I believed what my mother had said
years before and trusted her intuition, and over this time I studied and
developed my skills, knowledge and understanding in education on the
assumption that she was right.

Deb, my tutor, I found amazing. She was able to pinpoint what was needed
in my writing and helped me develop the process of learning to learn. What
do I mean by this? At this time, with her help, I was learning the basics of
education that I did not gain from my primary and secondary education. This
was a ‘bottom-up’ approach to learning. I had to compact my whole life’s
learning into a few months so that I was able to learn academically. Talk
about being thrown in the deep end, and being told to swim with out any
lessons. But I had made it through a year literally with one hand tied behind
my back, without all of the skills, knowledge and understanding that were
needed. A helpful tutor once told me, ‘Everyone else is achieving higher
marks because their education has not been as fractured as yours.’

Deb assessed me and told me that I was also gifted and talented. I denied
this and said, ‘I am dumb and stupid.’ I found that this new and positive
label was even much more difficult to hear because it did not fit my prior
childhood conditioning. The prior schooling was consistent, in that the
message of dumb and stupid was overwhelming, repeated daily, insidious, and so the power of the social analysis is that early educational trauma can often take years to recover from. The message of dumb and stupid had been well and truly internalised from how teachers handled situations in the past, and so the power of the social conditioning created internal beliefs about myself as a learner. My behaviour, values and attitudes had been fixed to a negative association about my own learning. Deb said, ‘You survived your first year of university and only 50% of students make it through with full marks in their first year.’ Deb said, ‘You are definitely gifted and talented.’ Naturally I rejected this positive statement about who I was as a learner. I found this foreign as it did not fit the image I had painted of myself. It was extremely difficult to accept at the time. I could hear what she was saying but I had been programmed (conditioned) to believe that I was dumb.

A High Distinction!

It was not until October 1995 that I accepted what Deb had said about my gifted and talented abilities. She gave me huge tasks of learning information in one to two weeks. I would come back to her and show her the work that I had completed. She reinforced again, ‘Do you realise, Dwayne, the
information that I gave you would take the average person a year to a year and a half to learn?’ She went on to say that I was a tall poppy and teachers would have not recognised my ability, or were in denial of my ability to learn, or they just were not interested. These were important analyses of the experience. She went on to say, ‘You are in the classification of an accelerated learner.’ I still did not accept what she was telling me. ‘Me gifted and talented?’ I told myself, ‘You have to be joking.’ Teachers who normally had no positive remarks seemed to give out more putdowns, such as ‘dumb,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘girl’ and ‘melon head.’ It had been mental abuse at its best. I had overcome so much, but my mentor was persistent in getting the message through to me though my self-defeating learned behaviours were still holding me back from learning.

This positive information that Deb was encouraging finally sank in. I remember coming in to her office after reading a report on one of my written assignments, ‘A high distinction!’ I could not help but recognise the impact that this had made on me. It came right out, a positive statement for the first time about my own learning on the assignment, ‘Bright and brilliant.’ What a powerful enlightenment to realise for the first time that my entrenched beliefs were not true at all, that I had achieved educational skills, knowledge
and understandings. My old school teachers were entrenched in their philosophies and the town and system supported them.

This was different from telling myself a positive affirmation about my mindset that I could do all things. This was a positive affirmation about my learning, that I was ‘bright and brilliant,’ which was supported by a respected teacher. She grabbed her head and said, ‘What have I been telling you for months?’ Her teaching ability to change my own embedded belief changed my insights about learning again. Not only did I have positive affirmations that I could do all things if I set my mind to it, I now had a positive outlook for the first time on my own learning. I was no longer defeated by the prior conditioning of teacher to student self-limiting beliefs of my own learning. In that moment the world seemed to stand still. I became aware that all things were possible. My weaknesses were becoming my strengths.

The positive affirmation about my learning changed my self-defeating behaviour. I was able to see how wrong I was to let those words ‘dumb and stupid’ tell me for years who I was as a learner. I was definitely becoming more and more my own self-directed learner. For the first time in my life, I

Indigenous Awakenings, D Kennedy
was free from the reckless words and abuse that had the ability to limit my potential. It had not stopped me. The negative processes seemed to have made me more resilient, able to challenge myself more, confronting the other demons in my life which stopped me from progressing to my full potential.

My passion for learning and understanding overflowed into my cultural understandings and everything snowballed. I had learned about how to change self limiting beliefs and behaviours. The more I challenged myself to change, the more I became the person I was created to be. I also challenged my behaviours and decided in all of my relationships to treat people with even more respect and understanding. This would not only change my learning but also influence my behaviour even more. I told myself that ‘learning is change in behaviour.’ In this way I slowly began to heal the wounds created by teachers who did not have the personal capacity or desire to behave in caring and ethical ways.

In fact, to influence or help someone change we can only change ourselves and lead by example. This in turn influences the behaviours of others. For example, if I display anger because someone is angry with me, does this in
fact help them or me? Neither! In fact it just keeps the anger going. But if I listen and take note, and care about what is being said, no matter how hard it is for me, I will be able to reflect, reframe, and answer the other with wisdom. I will be influencing the outcome of what will happen. My goal is to challenge myself to change my behaviour so the outcome is effective for me and positive for those around me. In these ways, the process of my life was making a high distinction – that is, a distinctive difference in my way of thinking, feeling about myself, and behaviour towards myself and others.

**Reflecting on the Change**

Writing this part of my story has helped me to develop my knowledge, skills and understandings of how my own learning and insights have taken place over the years, and what has helped me to change self-limiting or self-defeating behaviours in the context of the school environment. By sharing my story with you about my life challenges, I would like to impart to you that you too have a story to tell, maybe about circumstances that you have felt have kept you from exploring your potential. Remember that circumstances can be changed and self-defeating behaviours can be
overcome. Be inspired to change and grow. It is not only our abilities that make us who we are, it is our choices.

In my case, I had made the choice to face my demons and as a result I became more open to sharing my Indigenous heritage with people. By confronting the shame imposed by others who were in positions of trust over me in my childhood, I slowly began to see how the social system of rural Australian education was, and continues to be, an environment lacking in cultural safety for Aboriginal students and for students who have special learning needs. As my attitudes and behaviours changed due to these positive developments in my later educational experiences, it became possible for me to have the strength to acknowledge who I am and so I felt that this was honouring my Indigenous grandparents who could not honour their heritage because of the educational and social system of their day, combined with the racial differences and prejudice created by European beliefs, values and attitudes of the time. And I began to see how my time in public education was an extension in time and attitudes that could be directly traced back to colonial and racist attitudes. This was something that I needed to become more aware of in order to become more accepting of my own cultural background.
Deeper Levels of Self-Acceptance

In embracing more of my cultural heritage I asked Aunty ‘Cathleen’, a respected Elder and teacher, ‘What better way to learn than to place myself into my cultural context?’ I worked up the courage to tell Aunty Cathleen of my Indigenous background. She seemed like someone who ‘gave people a go,’ and also accepted their abilities and what they could contribute. I started to realize that my learning style was confounded by the following variables: my cultural learning styles; my learning disability; and my self-esteem due to negative remarks by teachers. I was now in a teaching/student professional relationship. My negative experiences now were my teaching tools. I needed to honour my students and their learning even though I had teachers in primary and secondary school who I felt had psychologically and physically maltreated me. What at the time seemed to be curses became my present day blessings. The difficulties that I faced while at school have helped me to reflect and see more clearly that the students and learning environment need to be respected and honoured for learning to happen. Over the years I have been able to develop strong teacher-student learning rapport,
so that students learn in their own learning style. The students that I have worked with seemed to find learning enjoyable, particularly if they were able to participate in concrete learning experiences.

I was able to bring my fondness and love for creative arts into the classroom. The students were able to participate in creative arts experiences. For example, a direct, remembered, imagined and mediated experience of creative and practical arts. This style of teaching incorporated all Key Learning Areas. The students were learning English, Spelling, Human Society and its Environment. This gave the students a whole learning experience which enabled them to make connections between arts, history, culture while enjoying the process of learning. The students’ ideas were also embraced and incorporated into the lessons. My teaching style had been subject to critique and so I learned by reflecting on past experience. This helped develop my own teaching skills, knowledge and understandings in a positive and open manner. I was also open to advice and direction from the teachers and elders who I had occasion to work with.

If learning is to happen in the classroom and become life long, students need to have positive educational experiences. So I made the learning
environment and experience enjoyable so learning was able to take place. While working as a teacher and also a disability specialist, I still extended my knowledge of learning and went onto my Bachelor of Education in 1997. I was now in control of my own learning which felt wonderful. Not only was I seeing how ineffective my education was but I was coming to realise that I was able to learn whatever I put my mind to. For example, in 1998 I wanted to develop my own creative abilities and undertake a Fashion Design course. In 2001-2002, I decided to undertake a Bachelor of Counselling.

When I decided to take on the challenge of going into counselling, I was met with the same type of resistance as that of past teachers. I was confronted with a lecturer telling me that I did not have enough experience, even though I was a teacher and had worked with those who had developmental disabilities for fourteen years. This lecturer said, ‘You do not have the right background to become a counsellor.’ I felt that this was a judgment which for a moment made me feel inadequate. But, ‘this did not stop me!’

The experiences of studying counselling have been interwoven into my educational, professional, cultural, spiritual, creative and academic journey. This has been influenced also by my Indigenous oral traditions, which have
been handed down from generations on both my mother’s and father’s sides. We are a people who learn from hands-on experiences, concrete experiences, and story telling. This is a form of ‘natural education.’ This happens around the open fire place or around camp fires. This was and still is my learning, which I embrace.

I honour my family heritage which descended from the Australian Aboriginal peoples. I have brought my Christian Spiritual understanding into the context of embracing the Rainbow Serpent/Creator Spirit. For example, the Dreamtime Serpent is female, she moved over the land making the hills and valleys. And is Mother of all living creatures. This seemed to speak to me, as did the biblical texts that I had learned. For example, as mentioned in Genesis, God had created the earth and the Spirit of God, moved over the face of the waters and He made all living things (The NIV Study Bible, 1985).

My spiritual understanding of my Aboriginal background has developed through community elders and my family/mob. As I became more aware of my traditional roots, spirituality deepened in understanding. I realised that my interaction with The Dreamtime had already been encouraged from an
early age by my maternal grandfather who was a keen gardener and had some understanding of bush tucker/food. I now express my culture through learning stories and painting of a contemporary Indigenous art inspired by my Dreaming.

I grew up in a low socioeconomic background. But we never wanted for anything because my mother provided for us the necessities in life of food, shelter, warmth, spirituality, and love. Growing up, being seen as poor influenced people in the community. No matter how polite I was, it never seemed to change people’s embedded beliefs, values and attitudes that you had to have money to be someone. Likewise, by not being seen as having money, our family seemed to be also seen as worthless. The irony of this social dynamic was that the perceptions of others about ‘poverty and worthless’ were rooted in their own lack of self-worth and in their European-based materialism. But regardless of these deeply embedded beliefs, my resistance enabled me to believe, ‘I am someone.’

Later in my development it was important for me to acknowledge that the same beliefs, values, and attitudes were handed down from the first Europeans who placed their foot on this great land and believed that there
was no culture, no society, or even people here. What they did find, they did not understand nor respect. In their own limited cultural view, they could not see buildings, farms, possessions, or other things they felt were ‘essential’ to human society, like money or, particularly, alcohol (Harris, 1990). As continues to be misunderstood or denied by the Australian mainstream, in fact there was a sustainable culture that existed across the continent for thousands of years, one which worked with the land, animals, and was one in which people worked together under respected and detailed laws. We are a great people, a great Aboriginal Nation, a great society, and a strong and honourable belief system based in a spirituality of Creator Spirit. So maybe the people in my community had the illusion that they were better than those who came from my end of town. But the whole construct of separating people from each other due to race, money, or status was not part of my cultural background. It was imposed upon us by others who presumed to dictate values in today’s world.

Our culture was inclusive and so our home was open to all the families in the area. My mother gave to friends and strangers that had nothing, and always welcomed them to our table. Our home sheltered not only my brothers and
sisters but also extended family, including uncles and aunts who were making a future for themselves by building their home while living with us.

My mother and father really didn’t mind who turned up to the door and my parents were known as ‘aunt and uncle’ to the whole neighbourhood. There was always plenty of spoon playing from my father when his brothers or sisters would turn up out of the blue, and my brothers would play the guitar and mouth organ, which had been taught by our maternal grandfather. There were always extras for tea, someone who had slept over, and someone on the load (packing up and getting ready to head out). My father would often just pack us up, and we too would be on the road living in a new town for weeks or months and sometimes a year.

As I reflect back now I realise that I was not poor, ‘I was rich!’ We had each other in our closely knit family and our extended family. In our travels, we saw this beautiful country Australia and gained a completely different education through life experience. We learned about life on the road while picking fruit and veg and going to school in different places. No matter how hard it was at the time to make new friends, regardless where we ended up I was always able to make and maintain one really good friendship.
We would spend heaps of time on different river banks across the country, swimming and going out to places like Lightening Ridge to look for opals. I realise that these things are all a part of who I have become and a part of my learning. The difficulties that have presented themselves have taught me to reflect on life in an exciting and spiritual way. Without these experiences I would not have the insights I do about learning and about spirituality.

**Conclusion**

As a result of these life experiences, I am richer in wisdom, family, and culture. To make the paradox even more so, travelling through my early experiences of trauma in mainstream educational environments has forced me to become stronger. While this is great for me, it is still a sad commentary on Australian rural education.

I now realise how boring it must have been for those ‘poor’ mainstream kids and those poor teachers, who used to give me such a hard time at school. While in one sense I am being a bit cheeky, in another way the story does raise some interesting questions about who was actually ‘poor.’
Perhaps they were bound by their own cultural and social system that placed them within many limitations, so that they were unable at the time to rise to the challenge of behaving in caring and ethical ways. There is little doubt in my mind now that living within the mainstream system handed down by European heritage is a difficult existence; to be in the same place day in and day out. And to live with these self-limiting beliefs and values does nothing for the human spirit. In these ways, I am grateful for the experiences of growth that have brought me from self-shaming beliefs and behaviours to being confident in who I am. This identity celebrates who we are – my family, our Aboriginal spirituality, our unique views on life, and our core values of hospitality, justice, and kindness.
Chapter 5

Critical analysis of education

An Indigenous Approach

to Spirituality, Imagination & Education

One way of understanding spirituality is to see it as that which brings connection and relatedness to the separate and diverse elements of experience; moments of oneness, where everything makes sense, when we see things differently, and perhaps ask questions of: why, when, how? Privett, (2005, p.8)

My early experiences of education helped me to form a sense of understanding how Indigenous education is different to that of mainstream. While I have discussed these experiences above, in this context the analysis moves into a new level of the learning spiral (see pages 73-76), and reflects on pedagogical issues that circle around meaning, learning, and cultural identity.

For example, attending a Catholic School at the age of five helped established my religious background and gave me an understanding of spirituality and God in an outward sense, even while the silent power of Indigenous spirituality and cultural knowledge was, for the most part,
unspoken, and yet a constant part of our lives. This experience of the hidden, unspoken and largely unconscious awareness of culture and spirituality is a common experience in many marginalised societies in the generations that follow colonial invasion, extreme violence, and stolen generation experiences that worked towards dismantling the family, destroying culture and language, and enforcing the dominant culture’s philosophies and beliefs (Battiste & McConaghy 2005, Harris, 1990). The paradox for me, as for many Indigenous people, is that the introduction of Christianity was experienced as a positive and helpful story of Jesus’ life and mission, and many of the beliefs associated with this Gospel narrative are good and helpful as well. However, the paradox lies in the double-edged sword of how Christianity has been conflated with European culture – and in this, our Indigenous culture was devalued, silenced as superstition and, for many people, was lost as a daily source of strength, ritual, and as a means to understand and cope with the challenges of life. Within this analysis I interject my personal recollections.
Childhood Learning & Culture

I was also influenced by the beliefs and spirituality of my family and extended families. Piaget (1932 cited in Wagener 1998, p.70) notes, ‘elementary school age children... become logical and orderly in their belief systems.’ My faith as a five year old child was very simple, imaginative and logical. For example, my image of God was influenced by the dominant stories of European tradition, that God was a male, he was old and wise, had a long white beard and, like the priests of the Catholic tradition, he had a long white gown. I didn’t know where this image came from as I simply received the images by being surrounded by images of Christ, Mary and the other saints of Catholic origin. As I reflect on these childhood images today the painting that represents this the most would be Michelangelo’s creation scene.

Fowler (accessed 31-01-2006 p.10) noted that,

...Whatever the source, the conveying of images in narrative, in art, in symbol and ritual, can awaken and nurture what we may call the spiritual imagination.
Another example of my imagination and spirituality was while I was attending a mass service and the priest said that, ‘God lives in your temple,’ by which he meant that your body was a dwelling place for God and you were to keep it holy. I went, ‘Wow, God lives in my temples,’ meaning that he lived in both sides of my head and that I needed to keep this a holy place. I took it literally and believed that God was present always in my head; this simple faith kept my interest in the spiritual world. This insight contrasted the controlling teachings of the church in terms of the belief systems associated with their culture in the traditional Christian and European way. My insight was more free, simple, and direct, and did not have attached to it all the does and don’ts of the church. In this way, my insights came from an Indigenous worldview of being open to Spirit being present in all things – even my temples! Wagener (1998) notes children’s ‘…beliefs are often rigid and concrete, lacking contextual understanding.’

In another example of life as a five year old, I was asked to go into the confessional box to make my confession. This is where the priest would ask you to tell him your sins. He would then tell you to repeat certain prayers over and over again in order to atone for your sins. When it came to my turn to go into the confessional box, I really did not know what to expect. When I
entered the box it was empty… where was the other person I had to speak to? I looked around, and there was no one there. Suddenly this voice out of nowhere started to ask me what my sins were. My first thought was, ‘Wow God is speaking to me!’ My second thought was, ‘What is a sin?’ Even though the question came to me, ‘what is my sin?’ it was not a sign of respect to ask a question of an elder. I really had nothing to say to this voice. Then the third question came to me; after being asked to go and repeat ‘Hail Mary’s,’ and ‘Our Father’s,’ what were these? The lay teachers and parents of this church community were commonly property owners who attended mass services on weekends, and who seemed to place all other children and their families into the same context as themselves. Looking back on this today, it gives the impression that cultural differences and beliefs of families were not taken into account and that all things were assumed to be known about the church culture and its system, such as, prayers of the saints, Stations of the Cross, church songs, and the service of the mass. There seemed to be no formal process to learning about the church’s culture and there was no formal process or consideration taken into account at the time for cultural differences and beliefs of others.
Even though I had many questions at the age of five, it did not erase my faith in how I saw God as Creator, who had made all things. My world was vibrant, full of colour and excitement as everything was new. My ‘spiritual imagination’ was active, ready, and I was willing to learn about and try to understand who God was. I listened to my extended family’s stories of God, which were mostly based in Christian mythology. These stories taught me how I should behave, how to treat others, and how things came into existence. My families’ experiences were indeed rich as they all had different religious and spiritual beliefs, but I could see a commonality in their beliefs and that was their love, kindness and teachings to me. Wagner (1998) supports these ideas by saying that children’s experiences will reach far beyond that of their faith community, and will stretch far beyond the constraints of the group of people they worship with, and that they will discover and experience other perspectives.

My maternal grandmother was a member of the Salvation Army and she would participate in the army’s musical band, marches and their church services. This helped me see that my grandmother had a belief in God and a commitment to her church. She also expressed her commitment by reading bible stories, and she would do this around the open fireplace.
Whereas, my experiences of our paternal grandmother were different again. Her Aboriginal spirituality was the Dreamtime. She told only brief aspects of what she believed in, as this was frowned upon in her time. It makes me sad to think about this today, as her spirituality was dominated by the European belief system of her time. The Dreamtime belief system was fractured by the colonial/Christian attitudes, and so my full understanding of how she may have believed is difficult to understand. Even while I know this, she had a strong sense of her cultural belief and spirituality which she passed down to her grandchildren.

**Rich Family Influences**

In Aboriginal families we have more than two grandmothers and grandfathers. We have several. These may be part of an extended family as well as direct siblings of the principle family lines. So my maternal Nanna was a great inspiration to my development. She was very open to others and their personal beliefs and would warmly welcome anyone to her table, to tell their story. Through this I could see that she was someone who I could learn from. She seemed very open and accepting and made no judgment of others.
and their faith or beliefs. She was a member of the Seven Day Adventist Church. These experiences were a rich resource for my faith and religious experience, which now expanded and embraced many facets of different spiritual and cultural insights.

Additionally, in later years the influence of an Aunty and Uncle brought their religious ideas into my life. They were Pentecostal. I felt that this really gave me another insight to other people’s beliefs in a loving God, but over time I realised it was not so simple. It appeared that many of the people who attended the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches seemed to be openly judgemental of others. I found this difficult to embrace at the time but came to the realisation that their attitudes were more about where they placed their focus and how they were bound by the Christian (and European) traditional cultural ways of judging others. This way of looking at people was to see a fallen race, and people in sin and in need of redemption. But what I had learned in my personal belief system and my attitude toward others was to embrace people through the rich experiences of faith and love which was extended to me, no matter what their experiences, expressions, or faith. My stance toward all my relations was about being open and embracing. So I was able to take all the positive experiences of my families and was able to
participate also with them in their prayers, rituals, and just observing them in their daily lives. As Fowler (accessed 31-01-2006 p.10) noted,

The motions, the symbols, and the interest inspired by observing loved ones and others participating in the practices of prayer, praise and worship, or of observing dietary restrictions, and participating in special holy days, or rituals, attract and form children’s imaginative capacities and their desire for worthy participation.

As I reflect on these experiences now, it was my grandmothers and my Nan whose actions seemed to speak to me more then others. It was through their influence that I learned how to treat others with kindness, respect, and love. Through these early experiences, I believe that I was able to internalise a strength and resiliency from these deeply respected elders, and innately this respect within me was part of our inheritance as Aboriginal people. This strength is expressed in my optimism, which I believe developed as a child because I was encouraged to believe in my abilities, in whatever I was good at, which as a child was in the creative and practical arts. I lived with love and guidance from these primary care givers, even though I found school-based education alienating and challenging. Indeed, in the school context all that I had known and cherished seemed to disintegrate before my feet. Somehow, in spite of school-based education, over the years I was able to
survive, grow, and focus on my abilities. Seligman (1995, p.56-57) suggests that,

Some children can put their troubles neatly into a box and go about their lives even when one important part crumbles... Children who believe specific explanations may become helpless in that one realm yet march [powerfully] on in the rest.

So I marched in the direction of creative and practical arts. I now believe as a teacher, and as a human being, that if a child lives with positive reinforcement they will develop optimism. The following poem is taken from the ‘public domain.’

If a child lives with

If a child lives with criticism s/He learns to condemn
If a child lives with hostility s/He learns to fight
If a child lives with ridicule s/He learns to be s/he
If a child lives with jealousy s/He learns to feel guilty
But if a child lives with tolerance s/He learns to be patient.

If a child lives with encouragement s/He learns self-confidence.
If a child lives with praise s/He learns to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness s/He learns justice.
If a child lives with approval s/He learns to like himself.
If a child lives with security s/He learns to have faith.
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship s/He learns to find love in the world.
Building Self-Esteem

Having reflected on this poem, I see the truth within the text that resonates with the experience found in my own childhood. When receiving ridicule instead of encouragement in school, I had learnt to be shy. This ridicule had affected my cognitive processes of learning. But I still lived with the love and guidance from my Mother, Nan and Grandparents who taught me more lasting life skills that enabled me to overcome my learning disabilities. They accomplished this through giving me approval in what I was good at, my creative artistic abilities. But they also conveyed a more holistic form of education that was very different from the artificial classroom environment, where many of the teachers did not appear to have a personal investment in the positive development of children. Seligman (1995, p.57) noted that,

> Having talent is a more global blessing than just being a good singer. As far as accuracy permits, children who think about good events as having more global causes do better across more walks of life.

The learning received from my family and extended family instilled this global awareness of positive self-esteem. It was through this that my general attitude toward optimism developed, which helped me to realise that I was
hard working, dedicated, persistent, and focused on what I was good at. Likewise, Seligman (1995, p.54) suggests that optimistic children tend to ‘point to traits and abilities that they will always have, like being hard working, likable, or lovable,’ and this rings true in my experience.

**Facing Education-Based Abuse**

In contrast to these positive and life-giving experiences of learning in my family and extended family, school-based culture was problematic for me and for many of my siblings. For whatever reason, my early experience of schooling involved psychological maltreatment. My reasons for raising these issues are many and include raising awareness of the impact of school-based abuse and trauma on a child’s development. Obviously, my analysis brings forward other social, historical, and political issues involved in environments where abuse occurs. In my case, it is likely that many factors were involved in my abuse that were quite beyond my control. These may have included coming from a low socioeconomic background, which may have implied to certain teachers or administrators that my family did not have the skills, knowledge, or ability to defend ourselves against these types of behaviours. Also, my childhood disposition may have been such that some adults in
positions of authority over me may have felt they could engage in abusive behaviour, including tactics of fear and intimidation, and that I would not be able to or capable of fighting back. Here again, the culture of the time suggests that many practices were condoned by teachers, priests, and others in authority, and the actions of these professionals were not to be questioned. It is interesting to note that Aluede (2004, p.266) states that,

Psychological maltreated victims... report the following actions of their teachers: humiliations of students in the public, name calling, cursing students and their families, poking fun at the students' appearance and abilities and similar degrading behaviours......the behaviour is occasional and infrequent ...the behaviour becomes repeated pattern of bullying a particular student who has been singled out by a specific staff member.

In one such experience, which just happened to span over four years, the teacher would check every morning that we had our shoes tied in an exact bow according to her specifications, and she would also make a large event that our finger nails were clean according to her standards. I remember clearly as she reprimanded me that morning for the first time for not having tied my shoes in the way she wanted. ‘I only know one way of tying my shoes,’ I remember trying to say as she abusively untied my shoes and told me to go over to a group of other kids who were trying to tie their shoes in a
different way. I also remember the look on her face as she glanced down at my hands to see my nails, and she told the whole class, ‘There is a filthy grot here! He could grow a spud paddock under his nails! Don’t you wash?’ I never did answer her question, even though I did wash. As a five year old I was terrified to answer her directly. This was something that we did not do at home, as it was not a sign of respect to answer back. I felt bad at the time, but it was the feeling of being ashamed that I had done so many things wrong. After this, I became very self-conscious about my appearance and also became overly apologetic.

As one might expect, a child in this circumstance would not develop adequate trust in their teacher, and the learning environment would continue to be a place of fear and intimidation rather than a positive or nurturing place of learning. Newman and Newman (2006, p.282) emphasise these notions when they suggest that abusive encounters with teachers become major indicators for students about their performance. When a teacher feels the student’s presentation is poor and due to lack of effort, the teacher may express this attitude through anger and in other ways that are harmful.
It was not possible for a young child to understand this teacher’s reactions. As such, I felt frightened of her and this was enough to keep me quieter than I was normally. I was taught to pay attention to older people and to show respect for seniority by not addressing the adult directly (Peterson, 2004 p.315). However, this social learning only works appropriately when a child feels safe in other ways to approach an elder, to ask a question or to convey important information. In the classroom environment and school culture, where single authority figures are common, children have little recourse to convey their concerns when dominated by a fearful teacher. In my case, while I enjoyed being in class with my friends, the overall dynamic with this teacher made it so that I had to remain vigilant in how I acted and in how I dressed, and this placed a great deal of stress on me. In today’s parlance, we would call this post-traumatic stress and/or chronic stress caused by social intimidation. Shumba (2002, cited in Aluede 2004, p.267) warned that,

Students should not be psychologically maltreated because: it humiliates and dehumanises them; it destroys their self-concept or image... it de-motivates and discourages their learning; it deforms their character; it makes them say; it makes them confused... [and] it frightens them.
Children Learn what They See

Children tend to learn what they see demonstrated by adults, so it is interesting to note that the difficulties in my case increased over the next months and years. Other students egged one another on, until there were a group of them who regularly abused me and other students. Lunch time was a nightmare, as these older boys would deliberately spit on my lunch. Oddly enough, their behaviour was not all that different from teachers who used intimidation and humiliation in the classroom setting. These behaviours can be sustained by the culture of a school in subtle and not so subtle ways, and it is natural for kids who behave in these ways to think they are only engaging in practical jokes (Plummer, 1999). Imagine how a small boy would feel after being humiliated in front of a classroom after facing further social shame from peers – many children would not be able to deal with the stress and may become either outwardly aggressive or inwardly shy and isolated.

In contrast, thank God, outside the school context I was encouraged to ask questions about things I did not know the answer to, and this was how I was taught to learn from a very early age. As it was a comfortable environment
to share stories and concerns, I told my mother the story about the older boys who were spitting on my lunch. I felt that in trusting my mother she would be able to deal with this situation, and she did by going to see my classroom teacher. I felt so good to be finally rid of this burden as it was happening daily but I did not realise that by getting rid of this burden that I was going to be faced with an even bigger burden.

As soon as my mother had left the school, my teacher asked me to come with her. She stood me in the hallway and caned me several times, while she said, 'You will not tell your mother things!' My eyes filled with tears and my head was so troubled trying to work out what I had done wrong, and I apologised for my behaviour. I found this physical punishment also difficult as I was never hit by my parents or grandparents, and it was very painful and frightening.

To reduce harm in an unsafe classroom, a student may display behaviour that reduces a teacher's anger. As Newman and Newman (2006) suggest, students are more likely to reproduce this placating behaviour to make the environment less threatening. Looking back on this, I am sure that it was due to this teacher being confronted with the situation by my mother that the
teacher took out her frustration and her own unconscious shame. It is fascinating to consider, from a social analysis of the dynamics, that the teacher’s behaviour reinforced the power of certain children to dominate other children – as if a social higher-class existed and was supported through (a) social intimidation, (b) strict rules imposed, (c) unspoken condoned abuse and violence, and (d) use of physical violence or force. By today’s standards, many of these tactics would be considered not only inappropriate but also illegal – however, it is plausible that similar social dynamics play out in today’s classrooms based in similar cultural bias and personality based issues.

But still, I am sure that if I had really trusted the teacher in the first place I would have told her directly about the lunchtime abuse but she seemed to be a teacher who did not display any openness to listening to children’s troubles. Her insistence that I was never to bring information home, to a place that might eventually challenge her absolute authority, is really a key component of the social dynamic.
Chronic Education Based Harassment

No matter what I did after this situation the teacher would find a way of punishing me inappropriately. For example, once she asked the class to work on a writing activity in a work book. This activity needed certain previous work to be completed and a friend offered me the use of her book, as we always shared our information. Before I could even have a look at the work, this teacher said, ‘You are cheating!’ and she caned me in front of the whole class. After this, I became so terrified and withdrew even more as I did not understand what was happening. As I reflect back on this experience I have become aware that cultural differences did influence the teacher-student relationship, as there was a conflict between how my learning took place at home and how learning was implemented in the mainstream school (Peterson 2004, p.314).

Likewise, over the next few years of development, like most children of the same age, I was still exploring my learning styles and how to behave in school. Naturally, I was totally unaware of this process that was taking place. Peterson (2004, p.314) states that children from different cultural
contexts will bring with them their internalised family ‘expectations about how to behave in school without being aware of the clash’ between the values of home verses the values of the mainstream classroom. Children have no idea at this stage of how to play the social game, nor are they conscious of the criteria that define an ‘elegant’ solution to a classroom problem in the teacher’s eyes.’

As a child, I spent several years of my life striving to achieve approval from this particular teacher by being law abiding, obeying and conforming to the classroom rules while showing respect for adults and teachers as I was taught to do. But this social environment and its psychological costs had nothing to do with academic performance (Peterson, 2004 p.314). Indeed, the social dynamics were obviously the most valued part of the circumstances - the psychological and social maltreatment served to boost the twisted position of the teacher while students like myself went unsupported and whose unrecognised learning disabilities and special needs increased their and my own difficulties with education over the coming years. Effectively, children of poor families and families who did not represent the ruling elite were more likely to receive little real education and would thus be more likely to leave school prematurely. To further comment
on these issues, Aluede (2004 p.266) states that, ‘psychological or emotional abuse involves attacks on the self or spirit.’ It is also noted by Shalaway (1998) who strongly suggests that,

Children... with learning disabilities typically face discrimination, misunderstanding, and emotional and psychological abuse. Instead of being helped to develop their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses, they are humiliated at every turn.

These insights suggest that similar dynamics continue to exist in educational institutions, and that my personal experiences are not that uncommon. It ought to be instructional to realise that, like most kids in similar situations, my learning difficulties became much more problematic after these experiences.

**Ongoing Costs of Abuse**

In subsequent learning situations I was not able to ask questions or seek help from older more experienced teachers or from students. My learning struggles evolved into a set of confounding variables that included an unrecognised dyslexic condition, a cross cultural background, socio-
economic disadvantage promoted by the society and school system, and learning styles that were being silenced by the dominant culture or group. In today’s context, in my work as an educational consultant and counsellor, it is clear that these variables do exist in many students’ ongoing experience – and that the school systems we have now still do not adequately address these concerns. Arrendondo (1999) suggests that hiding behind the dominant knowledge systems works to decrease cultural differences, and to eliminate cultural awareness. As the dominant system is basically self-preserving, it sustains bias over long periods of time. These systems do not recognise how differences of gender, age and socio-economic background interact with cultural background.

Teachers in the past colonial context, or in today’s still colonial world, do not necessarily make the effort to become aware of the differences in students’ learning. My own learning styles were in fact different and were not accepted in the classroom learning environment, and various teachers over a long period of time did not bother to inquire about why my learning style was different, or why my educational experience was more challenging for me than for other students. The specific experiences of my case speak to wider social trends, in that effectively the family values of the minority
culture and the values of cultures themselves can be denied, and students can become further marginalised by painfully difficult school experiences. These experiences also deny the student’s chance to learn which then prevents choices later in life in relation to seeking work and career advancement. Clearly this is not the outcome sought by social values that seek to increase equity for minority populations. As Arredondo (1999, p.107) suggests, the dimensions of power at work silenced one cultural knowledge and understanding for another, generating increasing problems for all concerned.

**Ongoing Challenges in Education**

Reading, writing, and spelling in Western culture has dominated the education of schools. This dominant culture of learning has not considered different cultural backgrounds anc different ways of learning (Arredondo 1999, p.107). Western culture have not really taken into account the multiple intelligences of a person and that people can code information about learning though other means. For example, Gardener’s (1993) theory of multiple intelligences, (cited in Merriam & Brockett 1997, p.147), suggests ‘that there are seven forms of intelligence: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, and internal and external personal
intelligences.' Likewise, I have come to recognise that as an Indigenous student I engaged in the classroom activities in unique ways and that my model of the world was different from that of most teachers and other students. These realisations have now become my personal strengths – however, in the years that I had to survive in the school system, having a different model of learning and of the world itself made life terribly traumatising, challenging, and isolating. Like my siblings and other members of my minority, we were left out of the means to gain support as our individual learning styles went unacknowledged, if not suppressed and denied.

For example, Peterson (2004, p.315) states that, 'the Anglo-Australian ideal of a “model” optimally responsive behaviour... in the classroom’ involves the student who:

1) Speaks up for own ideas.
2) Volunteers to speak in front of class.
3) Raises hand and offers to answer questions.
4) Asks meaningful questions in class.
5) Looks people in the eye when answering.
6) Talks to others about school work at appropriate times.
7) Joins in the school’s activities
Peterson (2004, p.315) also suggests that ‘Aboriginal students [are] judged to be less responsive overall than their Anglo peers, and engage in the seven desirable classroom behaviours less often.’ It is easily concluded that the mainstream educational environment is set up with many cultural assumptions that disadvantage students from different backgrounds. When you add to this abuse of ethical responsibilities on behalf of teachers, Hyman & Wise (cited in Aluede, 2004) suggest that,

Educator’s victimising behaviours like ridicule, physical assault... verbal discrimination... these behaviours have a higher likelihood of developing a series of symptoms, such as... fearful reactions, somatic complaints, dependency and regression.

Positive Education Supports Culture

To pick up the personal narrative, while dealing with the non-supportive teacher mentioned above I started to seek out adults and teachers outside the school system who seemed to want to listen and to encourage my learning. I was effectively seeking positive reinforcement from older people outside of school, where I seemed to learn best just by listening. This innate cultural
value highlighted our Indigenous oral tradition. My Nan and my Mother were great, as they both encouraged me to develop my writing skills by sending Nan a letter every week. I found this task extremely challenging because of my unrecognised learning disability. Also, the lack of support from my classroom teacher made life overly stressful. But the weekly letter helped me to focus on something positive and was an amazing strategy for coding the little information that I did learn about reading, spelling and writing. I transferred this information into the letter writing to my Nan, who provided me with regular positive feedback that gave me the courage to continue. This helped me to code information in a concrete way. For example, I was able to place my name and address on an envelope and begin writing a letter such as, ‘Hi! Nan how are you going? I am fine!’ My mother would help me spell most words I found difficult and frustrating. My family and extended family were the ones that encouraged my development in other areas of learning as they could see that the classroom environment was not meeting my needs.

Apart from concrete ways of coding information, I was able to code information in many ways which were not seen or assessed in the classroom. These included my respect for others because of my beliefs and cultural
background, and my family’s story telling which I kept away in a safe place in my memory. At these times, I used my intuitive sense which I trusted, and so I understood that there must be other adults in future who would encourage my learning apart from my Nan and Mother. This was a great source of hope during very traumatic years. My impressions of teachers was that they must all be like the abusive teacher who was currently in my life. But I still held hope that there were other teachers or adults who wanted to teach me, and later I met a local teacher who was also a mother who took classes and supported students in creative and practical arts. After meeting her, I realised that I did not have to hide all parts of my learning and abilities in the school environment.

**Positive Education Supports Strengths**

‘Mrs Smit’ came into the classroom with her hobby-text and showed us how to use this new medium. The regular teacher would disappear when she was there. When it came to arts, I was like a duck to water, and funny enough I chose a picture of the duck in her class to work on. She came around to me and squatted beside my table and placed her hand on my shoulder and said, ‘You are an amazing artist!’ The use of touch was reassuring that I was OK
and that I was doing well. How powerful the use of touch. Hetherington (1998) suggests that, ‘Some [teachers] purport that touch is a primary source of communication of which many clients, as children, were deprived… refraining from the appropriate use of touch in [teaching] situation can be damaging to the [student].’ Mrs Smit’s approach helped me feel at ease with my learning and what was happening. She found I was approachable and the use of touch helped to reassure me that I was in a trusting environment. Mrs Smit seemed to care about my learning, or was inspired to see that I had a gift for creative and practical arts. I had something positive to look forward to knowing that Mrs Smit would come once a week, for a while anyway. She would encourage me to do as much as I could while in those extra creative classes. After school, my mother had this amazing way of seeing the world and she would take the time to encourage what I was good at, not focusing on what I seemed not to be so good at. This was how I became confident in my art work and it became second nature as some would call it. My artistic abilities were nurtured and I felt that it was a gift that I was given to use.

This was encouraged at home by my mother buying me sketch pads and lead pencils, and an uncle in-law who would give me lots of note pads. This gave me a positive outlook on my learning in creative and practical arts. Having
the assurance at such a young age gave me a peace, knowing that I was good at something, even if at the time it was not sports or understanding how to spell, read, or to write very well. Seifert (2004, pp.137-138) notes that, ‘Students who are efficacious [perceive themselves as capable] are more likely to be self-regulating, strategic and meta-cognitive than students who do not feel efficacious… Students who see themselves as capable are more likely to display adaptive, mastery behaviours, while those who are less eager are likely to behave in an ego, performance-oriented manner.’ Regarding the vital importance of positive learning in early development, Burns (1995, pp.99-100) states that, ‘The best definition is to conceive of learning as a relatively permanent change in behaviour with behaviour including both observable activity and internal process such as, thinking, attitudes and emotions.’ These insights suggest that Aboriginal students require teachers who are sensitised to different learning styles, as well as to be able to support students in their individual achievements.
Aboriginal Giftedness

Indigenous students also possess a great sensitivity to the subtle cues of social communication, and I believe that my case illustrates having this heightened sense of awareness. This heightened sense of awareness developed my insights into adult behaviour, as I was able to assimilate and accommodate the external behaviours of my parents and extended family and process them internally. Likewise, this gift of perception made dealing with abusive teachers all that more challenging, as the gift of intuitive awareness around the emotional states of other people around me caused me constant unease, lack of safety and ongoing stress. However, in a positive sense, this innate cultural giftedness enabled me to perceive people’s spiritual energies, and at an early age I was displaying adult learning and cognitive behaviours. Likewise Wagener (1998, p.66) states, as children become more articulated thinkers they have the ability to assess multiple perspectives to situations and are able to articulate these events in an integrated way.
In school I developed a socially acceptable behaviour and saw this as a very good way of being accepted by adults who were in positions of influence. Henceforth, I developed my speech and became highly fluent and articulate in spite of a speech impediment and dyslexia. During those years I was so focused on listening to how people spoke, and what they spoke about, that I developed insights about different styles of communication with all people from all walks of life. This learning style is also innately Aboriginal, as our cultural background involves oral traditions that remain part of our lives, regardless of colonial oppression and loss of original language. In relation to my own sense of how I intuitively focused on learning in specific ways, I see this as intrinsic reinforcement. Burns (1995, p.111) states that intrinsic reinforcement gives the person a sense of achievement and develops self-esteem. From an Aboriginal context, the use of intrinsic reinforcement could rightly be considered a central value in Indigenous education, particularly in how oral stories often convey underlying messages that are not overtly stated and as such the listener and child slowly learn over time the inherent values and beliefs of the culture through an abstract and passive form of observation based in deep abiding respect.
Ongoing Challenges for Aboriginal Students

My ability in English and Math and the other Key Learning Areas had been slowly crushed by my first teacher who had instilled in me a sense of shame and guilt, and intense doubt about not being bright enough. According to Erikson (cited in Corey 2001, p.77), ‘early childhood is a time for developing autonomy. Children who do not master the task of gaining some measure of self-control develop a sense of shame and doubt about their abilities.’

It was not till I met ‘Sister Marria’ that I found a peace about learning and some sense that I could learn. This intervention started in years five and six, when Sister Marria took me for individual sessions. It was also great as I now finally had an environment in which I felt accepted. In addition to having individual lessons, I also had a new teacher who I could trust. This was ‘Mr Wills.’ He was kind and helpful, and a lay teacher who made the learning environment enjoyable. However, my knowledge, understandings, and skills of basic learning were delayed by the time I received teachers who
were both caring, kind, and wanted to help children learn. My confidence had been eroded away in the first years of childhood development.

In my counselling studies, I was introduced to Carl Rogers (cited in Corey 2001, p.172), who highlighted what were very controversial values in the culture of his time. He wrote about how people can self-motivate, facilitate their own learning, and so they ought to be supported as their own experts in their own problems. While Rogers taught in the field of psychotherapy he was fundamentally an educator. He expresses the following points to create a growth-promoting climate in counselling and in educational environments:

**Roger’s Core Conditions**

1. congruence
2. genuineness and realness
3. unconditional positive regard
4. acceptance and caring
5. accurate empathic understanding

(cited in Corey 2001, p.172)
For Rogers (cited in Corey 2001, p.172), accurate empathy is ‘an ability to deeply grasp the subjective world of another person. If these attitudes are communicated by the helper, those being helped will become less defensive and more open to themselves and their world.’ Aboriginal people require not only the suggestion of accurate empathy, and the other core conditions, but also a space in which we can explore our cultural understandings without the policing gaze of mainstream teachers or other authorities. In other words, when people have this freedom they are able to find their own ways of learning. This environment of trust, caring, kindness, openness and acceptance gave me a realisation that I was happy and there was a harmony in my life, as home and at school support became collegial, and I had no longer any fear of hiding myself.

Many Aboriginal people, the worlds they live in are divided in dramatic and personally harmful ways. As my school world was hostile, I retreated into another realm of imagination to cope and to survive. Likewise, the pressures of mainstream culture are difficult to understand for mainstream people – but for us all the messages are constant, on television, in media, at school, in rural towns, the invaders and colonisers still presume to own our land and we continue to be dispossessed of so much. Thus the pressures on the home
environment are extreme, and so sometimes Aboriginal families wear the brunt of colonial oppression when our families begin to self-destruct through over reliance on alcohol and other substances to cope with the pressures.

In a similar way, Rogers (cited in Prevos 2005, p.3) acknowledges that the different cultural spaces, or ‘hidden personality,’ relates to the public and private selves which must be as similar as possible for a healthy individual to grow. For the individual to be truly happy and for self-actualisation to be realised, the public and the hidden selves must be as similar as possible. Rogers believed that when all aspects of a person’s life, surroundings and thoughts are in harmony the ideal state of congruence is reached (Pervin & Oliver, 1997). We are a long way off from creating a social system in Australia where Aboriginal people feel welcomed to be themselves in both private and public spaces – indeed, there are many who believe this will simply never be possible, nor even desirable, because the fundamental values that underpin mainstream culture are opposed to the basic values of Indigenous culture and spirituality. If this is the case at social and political levels, than how much more challenging is it to imagine adequate support for Aboriginal students in mainstream government funded schools?
Education as Oasis

To my great surprise, still during my childhood, after years of suffering I found out for the first time that school was more than a place for ‘learning’ (or being told what was true), it was also a place in some ways to find peace, stability and friends in whom you could trust and enjoy. My awareness of God and spirituality developed through the lay teachers, sisters and fathers who were involved in schooling at this time. This feeling of belonging and being accepted reinforced my sense of peace about learning, especially because Sister Marria was interested in giving me the best education she knew how to give. Sister Marria took a particular interest in my learning style and tried her best to reinforce the rules of reading, writing, arithmetic and spelling.

She did not tell me that I was wrong in doing anything and supported me in a holistic way. She would meet me at the convent door, give me a supportive grin, and a plate of dessert! I could not think of a kinder way of supporting someone who was challenged by learning, and someone who had been maltreated. Sister Marria would teach me maths in the traditional way and get me to spell words phonetically. This style of mainstream learning was
indeed challenging for someone who had dyslexia, but we did not know about the learning disability then. Little did we know that this style of teaching was not suited to my individual style.

Shalaway (1998) defines dyslexia as, ‘a specific language-based disorder of constitutional origin characterised by difficulties in single word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing abilities.’ The authors go on to say that, ‘dyslexia is manifested by variable difficulty with different forms of language, in addition to problems in reading, often including a conspicuous problem with acquiring proficiency in writing and spelling.’ While we did not understand this at the time, Sister Marria was very persistent and pleasant in all of the sessions with writing, spelling and maths. I felt it was a joy to be taken out of the classroom. Sister Marria was a teacher in the true sense of what a teacher was, in that she had a real passion. She not only made a physical effort to help me, but also a spiritual effort. This was a space were I felt that I was not ashamed and did not need to feel guilty of my ability to learn. My memory was very developed and I found that I would remember everything that Sister Marria had taught me, even though the understanding to apply this information at the time did not exist nor correlate to my existing knowledge. I was able to access this information
twelve years latter in my own teaching degree, when everything that Sister Marria had taught me in those individual classes in years five and six became activated in my adulthood.

**Education as Alienation**

But after the brief times with Sister Marria, and when I moved on to secondary public schooling, I became much more of an introvert. My spiritual identity was missing, lying far behind me, and I felt lost. I also had a cold feeling of being alone. School was no longer a place were I found peace and joy, it was a feeling of being sent to a young offenders' institution everyday and not being able to change one thing. Other students were mean and nasty. Even the teachers called me names like, ‘melon head’ and ‘girl’, which did not help my learning as I already had a pre-existing learning disability and the early experiences of abuse were all too present for me when other forms of abuse followed. As Martin (1995, p.16) notes, a student who is subjected to harsh environmental factors like ‘inappropriate schooling and harmful surroundings may complicate a disability that is already present.’ Because of the harsh environment, I was unable to gain the knowledge, understanding and skills of how to learn. This was being crushed
every moment that I was inside the walls of this school. I spent more time learning to survive in this school than learning how to learn. I also had to redefine myself as I was in a new social context and I had to assimilate and accommodate new information of how to act and to participate. These acts take enormous energy, on top of dealing with constant social harassment. For example, in Piaget’s theory of assimilation (cited in Slee 1993, p.150) it is noted that a child will engage in the ‘incorporation of new information into the existing patterns of thought and behaviour.’ In this way, accommodation is ‘the modification of mental structures to incorporate new knowledge.’

I had become very articulate in speech, as I had coded oral information, assimilated and accommodated it into pre-existing knowledge, and this helped me survive in this new school environment. But I became a student who was struggling, and was invisible to teachers who did not even seem to recognise that my learning of English, Maths, and Science content was suffering, and my ability to read difficult text and the written word became more obscure to me as time passed.
The Invisible Achiever

In this analysis, I have coined the following term “invisible achiever.” This term which I have chosen to use affirms that I was in fact ‘invisible’. That is, invisible to teachers who had different cultural philosophies, beliefs, values and attitudes toward a student whose abilities had not developed in the context of mainstream schooling due to psychological maltreatment, cultural experience, low socio-economic background and an unrecognised learning disability. However, I was ‘achieving’ more in my family culture as my skills, knowledge and understandings developed in other areas in spite of the Western cultural learning styles with their over-limited views of reality. For example, I became focused on achieving in areas of creative and practical arts, music, industrial arts, home science, and other areas outside of the school context.

The problem with invisibility is that it is more difficult to bear, the individual experience of not being heard, seen, and ignored (Noel 1994). This tactic of oppression is commonly experienced and has long term affects on the individual through the affects of rejection and social isolation (Noel,
1994) In addition, the individual may develop skills to be able to adapt to difficult or complex situations allowing the individual to function within a changing environment (Wagener 1998, p.72). In my case, I was able to adapt and become competent in other activities, like playing squash, as these were outside of the abusive school context. These activities helped me to develop my self-esteem and other, different abilities than those that were highlighted in school.

Like the school system can not accommodate Aboriginal concerns, in other ways it does not accommodate other special needs either. For example, Howley, Howley & Pendarvis, (1995 cited in Bowd, 2003) suggest that it is up to a teacher to note students who are gifted and talented. But many teachers do not have the skills or interest to attend to students’ special needs. Bowd (2003) goes on to say that giftedness is not a scientific construct. For example, students who possess abilities of highly exceptional capabilities with respect to intellect, creativity, or skills associated with other disciplines in a particular field of talent are gifted and/or talented. This may not always be the case as some will have accompanying disabilities so teachers should not expect them to have strengths in all areas of intellectual functioning. Bowd (2003) also states, ‘that giftedness is viewed as having three
interlocking components: high intellectual ability, creativity and task-commitment that is motivation and perseverance).

Likewise, Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan (1982 cited in Bowd, 2003) state that, ‘several researchers have criticised the model because of the inclusion of task-commitment, arguing, for example, that it overlooks many gifted children who, for a variety of reasons, are unwilling to demonstrate their talents in the ways being measured.’ Some of these reasons are familial and cultural and these discussions of education commonly acknowledge that Aboriginality relates differently to the measurement of learning. Personally, I believe that I am one of those who had a variety of reasons for not engaging in these mainstream or so-called objective measures of learning. For example, Bowd (2003) refers to those who are from cultural minorities, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and those who have a learning impairment as “gifted underachievers.” In other words ‘gifted underachiever’ only exists in the context of westernised IQ tests which are used to test a child who is from that cultural context. In contrast, my report cards had identified me as a student who was not achieving in Math, English, Science, History, Reading, Spelling and Writing. These measures served to further isolate me from my peers and from the schooling system itself – more deeply entrenching
teachers’ prejudices towards a minority student who just did not ‘measure up.’ It is rarely if ever acknowledged that such measurements actually work to support colonial attitudes that marginalise ethnic and Aboriginal students. To emphasise these views, Bowd (2003, p.9) notes that, ‘it is recognised that performances valued in one culture may differ from those valued in another, and hence the assessment and identification of giftedness and talent [among many other issues] will vary cross-culturally.’ This makes my term of ‘invisible achievers’ all the more poignant because there are whole sides of this debate that remain largely outside of the controlling gaze of mainstream people who assume to know what the experience of being a member of a minority group is like. There are still many sides of this story that need to be honoured, and for this to occur mainstream educational practices need to be questioned and the underlying cultural bias of education needs to be critiqued.

**Identity Aboriginality and Minority Status**

The significance of my story is how it illustrates the connection between identity, Aboriginality, and minority status in the context of experiences of education. As this chapter suggests, colonial educational values produce the
minority status for Aboriginal people. Likewise Mackinlay (2006) suggests that there needs to be a move into decolonising the classroom and making it a place where Aboriginal students can participate more freely while exploring and performing their identity openly with the power to learn and to release their energy of self in a culturally inclusive environment. While Vaughan (2006) states that it is essential to develop curricula which reinforce the philosophy of Aboriginal perspectives rather than making it about Aboriginal people. She also makes the point of Aboriginal perspectives being included in the classroom so that mediation can happen between the differences in cultural perspectives. Thus in understanding the overlapping histories represented by personal autoethnographic narrative and colonial based education, the rise of minority identity in today’s post-colonial contexts raises the challenge of acknowledging and incorporating Aboriginal perspectives in education (Battiste, et al, 2006).
Conclusion

In reflection of these lived experiences, it was one particular teacher who gave me a feeling of being embraced, who honoured my learning and my family’s cultural-identity. Her teaching method was coherent with that of my family culture. She was caring, kind and supportive of my individual learning style. This instilled in me a sense of hope at such a young age that I was able to learn. In latter years it helped shape my life, to become persistent in wanting an education. But it has been a great ordeal to face the external limitations of teachers who persisted in berating me and my learning abilities. It has been due to their negative comments and putdowns that I wanted to make a mark in education in a positive way. It is through telling the story of my education that I now hope to assist educators in creating an environment based in supportive teaching philosophies for students from minority groups. As my story suggests, when correct teaching philosophies are not put into place in the early years of education, students will face life long educational challenges. Aboriginal students will face even greater obstacles to learning, and thus will continue to experience inequality in finding suitable work and contributing to society in an effective way.
Chapter 6

Aboriginal Identity through Spiritual and Cultural Insight

At the age of twelve I became more spiritually open and aware of the differences in my cultural beliefs, and also the sameness between religion-based spirituality and the natural-based spirituality which I believe was more innate.

At this time I also felt more and more isolated and alienated from my Catholic Christian upbringing and the support network of the sisters and fathers. Not only was I losing their support of my learning, I was losing their friendships. This was also very important to me as I was experiencing newness in awareness of my Indigenous cultural background and Dreamtime.

At the same time, I was attending a new school that did not embrace any form of difference or support any differences in learning, in faith or in spiritual experiences. There was no support felt in building friendships and
the school was not interested in supporting my learning disability which also accompanied my giftedness. I was facing confounding variables and had no support system, no church, and no friends as most of them moved onto the Catholic High School miles away. The fundamental values and system were totally different. This is supported by Morin (cited in Meier 2003) who states ‘a value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive often of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action [emphasis my own].’ In many ways, I felt like the undesirable.

**Culture Shock**

This new Central School’s environment was, to say the least, a culture shock. It was not a place where students’ individuality was supported as the Catholic School seemed to. And it was a place where pre-conceived ideas and expectations were made before you even stepped onto the school yard. For example, it was a school where the teachers’ expectations came first. The students’ request to participate in extra curriculum activities came second. In fact I was approached by one of the teachers, who was the science teacher and the football coach, who said, ‘Great, another Kennedy! You will
play football like your brothers, eh’ I was different. His expectation of me to play football, and judgment that I would participate and follow in my brothers’ footsteps was a burden that I did not want to carry. So when he heard my reply, ‘I don’t play football,’ he just turned his back on me and walked off. So much for teachers acting like professionals. It did not matter to him that I was in fact a good squash player. It had to be football or nothing. It seemed that his teaching philosophy was based around a particular game and the majority of educational theory went out the window. My mistake of not conforming led me down a path of being verbally abused by this individual every time I attended one of his classes. He would shame me and make me feel guilty that I did not play football by calling me ‘girl’ or ‘melon head’. It is interesting to note that in subsequent years the ‘white colonial mainstream’ rewarded this teacher with a promotion to lecturing at one of Australia’s leading universities. Needless to say school became a nightmare from that point on – as students took this bully’s lead and started verbally and physically abusing me for years thereafter.

From a critical social analysis, Sabo & Panepinto (cited in Cohen 2001) suggest that football is a social ritual that derives from social structures that allocate male roles and the shaping of male dominance. The ritual of football
also shapes the person’s individual identity and the very act of playing football is the mobilisation of this masculine structure. A ritual of this sort can be seen as patriarchal. This is a game in which the older males impart masculinity to younger males. These older men are socially visible and recruit younger males. This is when ‘appropriate’ behaviours, values and attitudes are formed about masculinity. This unfortunately often manifests as a form of hyper-masculinity that in fact devalues all other forms of identity and is seen as controlling and conforming. As the authors suggest, older men induce conformity from younger males by pressure, trickery, threats and punishing to achieve conformity. Personally, this teacher seemed to find it a real laugh and to use prejudice language which he did not seem to care or be aware that he was affecting my development towards sports and learning in general.

To further illustrate, this teacher seemed to seek out ways of punishing me and placing me into difficult situations. For example, he would get us to play basketball and half of us would have to take off our shirts and half would leave them on. This was how the sides were made up: shirts and skins. This really made me even more self aware, due to having had third degree burns early in life which resulted in scarring that was plainly visible. This was
enough for me to feel reluctant to participate in school sports. It seemed that this teacher liked to subject me to humiliation and was delighted to see my face crumble when I was told to take my shirt off in front of the rest of the group. Aluede (2004, p.268) notes that students who are ‘psychologically maltreated… suffer a… decline in psychological development which usually lowers students self-esteem…’ and that ‘the teacher becomes an aversive individual in the student’s life, someone to escape from or avoid.’

**School as Imprisonment**

No wonder I became more and more disillusioned by teachers’ behaviours which seemed to reject differences so that school became more of an imprisonment. I was different and was made to feel different, an outsider, because I did not conform to their idea of what a young male student should participate in. Sabo & Panepinto (cited in Cohen 2001, p.81) note that name calling of this fashion or ridicule is another way to induce conformity (Plummer, 1999). This ridicule is introduced by the use of homophobia and deceptive tactics, such as name calling, using words like ‘pussies, limp wrested,’ or ‘girl,’ and any other name calling that would enforce conformity. These words imply to young male students that they are not
tough enough. Conformity in sports suggested that you didn’t have what it takes to play football, so you did not have whatever it takes to be a ‘man.’ Noel (1994) notes that individuals who have a notable difference are seen to be of as lesser value and discredited in the dominator’s eyes, and if the individual does not conform or can not conform then a stigma, a mark of shame, will be attached to that person which means that the individual’s identity becomes stained. Thus these systems of oppression create a world which alienates and isolates the individual from the dominant group. Shumba (2002 cited in Aluede 2004) warned that students who are emotionally abused tend to exhibit the following symptoms: excessive worry about school performance; change from positive to negative self-perception; verbalized fear that teacher would hurt them; excessive crying about school; headaches; stomach aches; decreased functioning in a social situation outside class; nightmares or sleep disturbances; avoidance; and withdrawal behaviour or depression.

As the authors suggest, those who are embedded in their own personal philosophies of teaching are either not capable or are simply not interested in challenging their self-limiting beliefs, values and attitudes. Their theories of teaching practice are likely too context-bound, that is, limited by their cultural-centric way of looking at the world. In cases where this culture is
bound up in a sports-based value system, this can dominate and silence any other theories of pedagogy (Cranton 1992, p.290) and (Merriam & Caffarella 1991).

Personally, these experiences, as difficult as they were, and as much as they may have controlled me for a time, and as much as they may have been a form of conditioning that I was made to feel lesser than other people - these challenges forced me to grow. By challenging my beliefs, spirituality, values, attitudes, and emotions I was forced to come to an understanding of who I am in contrast to the abusive culture in which I found myself. Because I had a religious spiritual context in which I was able to place all that was happening to me, I had a means to reframe these experiences. Otherwise I don’t think I could have survived the trauma.

In spite of the pressures to do otherwise, I was unable to go against my morality, beliefs, and what I valued most. I was unable to treat them in the same manner in which they had been treated me. I had to forgive them. As hard as it was for me to deal with their arrogance and victimisation, I had to forgive. Ronvik (1989) states that students who are gifted and talented often have strong values, which often represent an idealistic sense of justice and
morality. These students are non-conformists and independent in their actions. This is also supported by Meier (2003, p.94) who says that, ‘the value structure is responsible for a person’s alignment within its environment and leads to a discharge to drive energy into action.’ The author goes onto say, ‘in this context, value structures appear to be the most fundamental aspects of an individual’s personality.’

**Minority Resilience and Resistance**

I felt by listening to a spiritual law, my cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes, that things would finally work out even though it seemed that I had been a victim for years. Meier & VanKatwyk (2001, p.144) suggest that for a person to leave behind being a victim they must listen to their spirituality. Through this they know that to live fully one must address their values, beliefs, attitudes, principles, and morality and make the connection to positive changes in behaviour. It is extremely important that this connection is made, otherwise the healing or ‘breaking of abusive patterns whether victim or offender’ can not happen.
It wasn’t until finally my mother’s words came to me, after a group of school students in my class were singing out ‘melon head,’ ‘hey melon head.’ Remembering what she had told me, for the first time I did not react to their insults and I ignored their behaviour. This caused a change in the way they were interacting with me. At the time I remember telling myself that I would not be called by anything other than my Christian name. These students finally sang out to me by my Christian name, ‘hey Dwayne!’ It was then that I offered my first response to their existence and I turned around and replied, ‘Yes!’ They said, ‘We’ve been singing out to you.’ To which I replied, ‘I have only heard my name once!’ After this they got the message. By commanding respect I had finally changed my behaviour and theirs. It was amazing that their words had so much negative power over me. I turned the experience around and became in charge of what was happening to me and it was simple. However, it is not so simple that the underlying issues of being different and experiencing these sorts of difficult events has taken me many years to unpack, to understand, and to thus become whole again.
Walking my Walk

I had to travel through my darkness,
My fear and my rejection of how others had taken
control of
My life, My childhood, My adolescence,
What did I have to lose, nothing!
I had nothing more to lose?
I had given the teachers and students the power to rob
me of my Confidence,
My abilities, My giftedness, My learning,
I realised that it was my time,
Time to stand up
Time to take action
Time to decide that I was someone,
Someone who was in pain,
Pain of being treated as different,
Someone who ended up in tears on arriving home,
Someone who wanted more,
I decided that I was more,
More than just a classification
“Miss fit,”
School was like going to a young offenders' institution
for being different.
That difference was not accepted,
Well I decided that I only had myself in these classes,
no sisterly or motherly or brotherly support,
I only could lose more of me,
I had to stand up,
In my values, My beliefs, My spirituality
I had to make my voice heard I stepped out.
Here I was for the first time being called by my
Christian name,
And weeks later being confronted by a student who
wanted to fight me and he did,
I won!
He apologised the next day.
I was accepted!
I was abused by a teacher pushing me into the pool,
    I confronted him,
    I stood up to him,
I told him that I would no longer take the abuse,
    My peers sung out to me, “GO,” “GO.”
    I was accepted!
It was not due to conforming,
    To becoming the same;
It was due to just standing up for who I was in my pain
    of being humiliated, abused,
    I am Dwayne Wannamarra Wyndier.

I was developing a more innate sense of control around my autonomy. The external forces may have been at work still but I had started to challenge what authority I would give these faces. What a powerful experience to take control and start to develop confidence in who I was. In this learning I was respectful, likely hyper-sensitive to other peoples’ needs and feelings as I had known what it was like to have constant criticism from teachers and students. I could have developed the same behaviour as them, and therefore I could have learnt to condemn others; but my cognitive problem-solving abilities were in action. I developed insight into how to stop conflict with others. Like Burns (1995, p.113) states, people ‘showing insightful learning are able to modify their behaviour as and when necessary in the light of the situation as it appears at any given moment or context.’ In addition, children
with learning disabilities such as dyslexia are most likely to also have
cognitive areas of giftedness. These ‘children are good at problem-solving,
abstract thinking abilities and excellent in communication skills’ (Davis &

Ministry Resilience and Resistance at

University

After school many opportunities opened up in life once I had the courage to
face my challenges of learning. After leaving the abattoir, my work in
supporting people with developmental disabilities expanded my awareness
on many fronts. Eventually I supported myself through university in teacher
education. At this time I started re-moulding myself and stepping into the
unknown. I faced fear and excitement, and all of the uncertainty, and now
with a conscious awareness of working with a learning disability. These
awakenings brought me back to my early experiences of learning which
have been discussed at great length above. The insights gained through my
optimistic attitude towards learning provided me with rich data to reflect on,
in terms of visioning a new spirit into education in Aboriginal contexts.

Indigenous Awakenings, D Kennedy
These contexts involve the many issues faced by my people, including health, family life, reclaiming of culture, spirituality, and language, and building a stronger educational experience that is more appropriate for our needs. Appropriate education needs to be more accessible, more approachable, and less determined by mainstream considerations.

My very first assignment in university was an oral presentation in which I received a distinction. I could not believe it; a distinction, how can this be? But then I received my written piece of work back and it was marked with just a pass. The lecturer could not understand what had happened in my written text. I had to tell him that I had dyslexia, as he had seen my work first hand. I was met with a joyful relief. He said that I was a gifted and very strong and articulate student who was genuine about learning. He really wanted to help me and advised me to get special consideration and help in my learning. I felt that I was appropriately being placed apart from the group because I had special needs. In fact, it was essential for my learning to develop.

This story illustrates the need for greater understanding of the unique learning needs of Aboriginal students, who are subjected to the same
measures as mainstream students but whose needs are likely different. The assumption that students should present and name their special needs leaves much up to fate, and as my prior experience warrants this can result in decades of poor educational methods that prevent Aboriginal students from accomplishing recognition in the styles of learning they are comfortable with.

While it was very positive that my current university lecturer was open to my disclosure of having dyslexia, it was also a sign of poor pedagogy that he did not have insight to make suggestions about why I received only a pass in that particular essay. In fact, he said that he was going to fail the assignment, but that because my oral presentation was so well done he felt this was not warranted. This also suggests to me that the university system has predetermined educational measures that will disadvantage many minority students, students with disabilities. While the university system of equity might be in place already, these systems are very difficult if not impossible for students to access — and most students, like myself, are not made aware of these services until we are put into an overwhelming situation of crisis in learning. Especially for Aboriginal students, this only adds to the pressures
of being away from family, familiar surroundings and having to conform to a new environment and the foreign culture of a university.

At this time in my university experience I had what seemed to be another external limitation placed on me, in that my lecturers said that I would be unable to cope with or undertake large amounts of theoretical study. I knew well and good that I was undertaking a tremendous theoretical content by going to university. Deep within myself I knew that I had the ability to learn and break the pattern of thought that I was in. I was open to explore my own awareness. I was able to access the creative internal gifts to learn about and displace the external limitations. This was first a challenge to overcome psychologically, and later I would be able to confront the bias in university education that might try to deny me access to higher levels of theoretical consideration.

As a personal point of inspiration, at this time I was told by my Aunt Mildred, who is a minister, ‘You will do extremely well, as you have a creative spirit.’ Likewise, I note that Myss (1996, p.135) says that, ‘creative energy breaks us out of habitual patterns of behaviour, thoughts, and relationships... gives us our basic survival instincts and intuitions, as well as
our desire to create music, art, poetry… and the curiosity to investigate.’ In a
university and social environment in Australia that promotes equity, one
might ask why would lecturers in the fields of education suggest that certain
students are not capable of undertaking large amounts of theoretical
components; and then are unable or unwilling to take time to assist the
student in their work? It does seem a bit odd, and suggests that there is an
ongoing need to educate teaching staff in universities, as well as to
encourage greater understanding of the issues that exist in mainstream
schooling in the community.

Indigenous Awakening through Education

My basic desire was being creative, artistic, and this creative energy gave
me the ability to see past the constraints of mainstream education. Also,
having curiosity gave me an interest to learn in all areas. Creativity also
gives a person the ability of ‘multi-potential,’ meaning that the individual
has the ability if given the right environments to develop vocational and
educational competencies (Achter, et al, 1996, p.65). Indeed, I believe that it
was much more than that, it was the ability to transfer and interlink my
artistic giftedness and transfer that ability into my academic work.
Achter, et al (1996, p.65) notes that, ‘a multi-potential person is ‘any individual who, when provided with the appropriate environments, can select and develop any number of competences to a high level [and] exhibit multiple educational-vocational interests at comparable intensities.’ In Figure 6.1 below, you will see a diagram that I have created to represent these pathways of teaching and learning in Aboriginal contexts where there are often many confounding variables for children in schooling, such as cultural misunderstandings, physiological challenges of diet, family unrest, learning disabilities or issues of physical health like Otis media. The diagram illustrates that the other abilities that have been invisible to mainstream learning and in teachers’ attitudes are in fact important skills that can be transferred into theoretical undertakings and other types of higher educational endeavours. It appeared to me that there are obvious external limitations placed on the minority student, and the student who may have a disability, and that these students often have the most to give to society – thus the systems of education that currently exist place these students in a box (not unlike the confessional box) that labels students as ‘reject,’ ‘failure’ or ‘pass’. In reality, and in daily practice, current systems of education do not seem to have the internal ability to self-critique and to analyse the real
issues that students are facing. Part of this educationalist blindness lies in cultural bias and prejudice, as well as in teachers and lecturers not being adequately educated themselves on minority issues and on issues of special consideration in teaching and learning.

**Figure 6.1**

Diagram 6.1 also suggests that poor educational practices serve to increase the likelihood of minority students remaining entrenched in the cycles of poverty, low socio-economic struggles, without the hope of gaining skills
through education which remains dominated by limiting beliefs and attitudes. When education mirrors the social prejudices that have existed in society, education itself remains entrenched. It is time to start digging us out of this hole. In a similar way, the diagram suggests that when education works from an empowering stance that supports minority students, they will be more likely to engage with critical self-reflection that enables moving from strength to strength. In this way, critical thinking is meant to take on the qualities of liberation, freedom, and creativity that builds on students’ lived experiences of family, culture and spirituality. This style of education opens doors to greater understanding of differences and these necessarily include a wide range of issues, including possible disabilities and their solutions in today’s learning context.

In my case, I had to work and study at the same time to achieve the desired outcome, as I came from a low socio-economic background. I had to have financial backing, and seek out various supports, so that I could have an appropriate environment in which to learn. As Winner (2000, p.5) says, students with many challenges in life can ‘show high ability… for exceptional achievement’, but that, ‘one needs both high ability and perseverance.’ Ericsson’s research also demonstrates that hard work and
dedication does not rule out that there is also an innate ability within the student (Winner 2000, p.6). This innate quality or giftedness exists in all students, and ought to be recognised more by systems of learning. Likewise, all Indigenous students possess a tremendous giftedness by virtue of their cultural heritage and they deserve to be upheld and treated with greater respect by the mainstream Australian people.

**Indigenous Pride of Place**

It was now my second year of university and who should come into my life one day but my ex-teacher from the central school. I was on my way to the gym to work out. He was singing out to me as if I was back in school, ‘Hey Kennedy!’, ‘Hey Kennedy!’ Reluctantly, I turned around to see no other than ‘Mr X’. I said to him in a rather assertive tone, ‘Excuse me! My first name is Dwayne!’ In my memory I was brought back to the parallel experience of the kids from his class using the same tone of voice, the same demeaning words, and the same quality of disrespect. Having taken my own path seriously, to be put back into this dynamic was very disconcerting and I had had enough.
He went on in his abrupt manner and said, ‘What are you doing here?’ I replied, ‘Going to gym!’ He then laughed in my face. He was still embedded in his past prejudices. As I stood there, a blank expression came over his face. At the time, giving him the benefit of the doubt (as I am want to do, even though he might not have deserved it), I thought that his question, ‘What are you doing here?’ was in fact asking, ‘What was I studying?’ After the fact I have thought that it is more likely that his crude question was more like saying, ‘What are you doing here, are you cleaning the toilets?’ The quality of his communication was only raise doubt and I came to understand that this was part of his tactics, to make certain people feel inferior and to put them on edge. I replied to him, ‘Do you mean what am I studying?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I then replied, ‘I am becoming a teacher.’ His mouth fell open, his body went into a deep slump, he turned, and walked away. In all my years of studying he has never spoken to me again. He is now teaching Aboriginal students, and I wish him all the best.

As the spiral continues throughout life, there are experiences of past trauma or challenges that ask us to revisit, to reframe, and to heal and let go. This is not to forget. It is to learn from the past, to make a better life and to give your best. Reflecting back on this encounter with the old teacher today, I
realise that, 'Hey Kennedy,' went back into my past. Thinking I had already dealt with this but in fact I had more to learn. This was about someone who had made me feel ashamed about who I was, as a learner, student and an individual. This time the circumstances were different and I was no longer a child facing an adult. I was an adult facing an adult, and it was in this I realised that he had much to learn, if only he would finally rise to the challenge. In these ways, we need to realise how much learning is a social interaction. And while we are in many ways limited and kept down by people who live in their own self-imposed prisons, we are also capable of learning and growing in spite of poor teachers.

In facing this person as an adult, and in having the confidence to honour myself by changing the interaction and not let him get away with his behaviour, we stepped up to the playing field with a new set of rules. I was direct and clear in my statement that my first name was Dwayne. He did not acknowledge it, showing another reflection of his ignorance. He was still bound by his cultural prejudices. After all, he had said years before that I would not amount to anything. It must have hurt his ego a fair bit to be proven wrong.
For me and ironically, for this old teacher who was set in his ways, identity is a complex phenomenon of human growth and learning. It is complex because it comprises many parts. These parts need to be challenged over time to grow, but the parts of a person also need to be supported, nurtured, and sustained within a positive learning environment. For me, this positive influence did not come from teachers overall, particularly during those early years. As I think about this old teacher, I feel fortunate to have had positive influences in my life, from my family and extended family, who enabled me to learn more respectful ways of supporting students. As Stewart (2002, pp.579-580) notes,

identity integration... represents an internal process of self-development... of cross-cultural [and] psychosocial development... of the self as inherently composed of multiple facets, in which the different forms or facets of self... come together and impact each other in potentially transformative ways.

These awakenings happen by acknowledging who we are and by affirming our core identities as persons with value. When you experience years of trauma through being devalued, you begin to realise this most basic part of what children need to grow. Stewart continues to say that,
definitions of self, as raced, gendered and educated move from being externally imposed limitations to internalised, interlocking components through which self-actualisation may be more fully realised. Such a symbiotic relationship means that each different socio-cultural identity facet is identifiable.....in all areas of the individual’s life.

I was no longer bound by the prejudice that had imposed upon me one vision of who I was. I was now free to name the rules of the game and, sadly enough, those who treated me with disrespect in the past were not able to rise to the challenge. Likewise, as I earned and grew the more the externally imposed limitations fell away. As I became educated my spiritual and cultural identity became more internalised and my self-actualisation, awareness, and eagerness grew to embrace my spiritual and cultural backgrounds. This was due to my Christian upbringing and Indigenous awakenings. Part of my journey has been to overcome the external limitations and develop my faith in God and Creator Spirit.
Coming Out of the Darkness

As noted by Fowler (accessed 31-01-2006, p.8), ‘faith is deeply related to the human need to find and make meaning, and to do so in a trusting relation to the divine Being and Spirit from whom creation issues.’ My faith was about coming into new awareness, and awakening myself to developing a deeper relationship with God/Creator Spirit. This was also at the centre of making sense of social interactions where I had felt misunderstood. Both the social impacts of abuse and trauma, and the spiritual quest to connect with my Dreaming, led me towards coming out of the darkness. The darkness for me, and for my people, is a great suffering of Mother Earth and of our families together in the face of a foreign culture that imposes upon us harsh and difficult rules. I call this emerging relationship with self, God and others a path toward spiritual autonomy. I define spiritual autonomy as going further than just the cognitive processes and perspectives of spirituality. Spiritual autonomy is inclusive of being able to apply knowledge and understanding in actions of kindness, understanding and mutual support. This awareness goes beyond the limits of materialism, and challenges the educational practices that seek to concretely measure children’s abilities, and
then to judge them according to some imposed standard that does injustice to their innate abilities.

These pedagogical beliefs stem from a deep respect for my Indigenous culture and for the spirituality that comes from the Dreamtime. This teaching goes beyond the cognitive. In this awareness, faith is acknowledged as a necessary part of human wellbeing. As Fowler (accessed 31-01-2006, pp.8-9) so aptly put it, ‘we must include a richer range of dimensions of the constructive knowing and committing that honours the role of faith [in] imagination, emotion, and a moral sense.’ This sensibility weaves in and out of the Dreamtime Serpent and our Indigenous stories of moral courage and of acting with respect towards all people and all of creation. Fowler goes on to say this is an ‘interweaving of example, emotion, knowing, discernment, and response.’ For me, his words echo the Aboriginal Australian vision of coming out of the darkness of cultural genocide, and of standing up for what we believe in and must create in this lifetime. This means we must stand up to our oppressors, and call ourselves by our own name.

Fowler’s (accessed 31-01-2006, pp.8-9) concepts of growth in spiritual awareness and faith resonate with me powerfully, and deserve special
consideration in this discussion of Aboriginal awakening. For Fowler, the levels of awakening to deeper faith enable the person to rise to the challenges of the moment, and to find that deep place of peace inside, even when the external forces of prejudice in education or in abuse and violence work toward dismantling the human spirit into ashes. These levels of gaining inner strength and awareness include: ‘1) The capacity of responding to and evaluating sources of authority.’ This area of growth involves coming to terms with external pressures that impose their own values on us, and over time coming to a deeper awareness that authority figures in our lives can be respectfully questioned. ‘2) The quality or extent of our capacity for... deepening... [and] widening of the imaginative construction of the perspectives of others.’ This aspect of growth for Indigenous Australians involves applying our Dreaming wisdom to the social constructions of mainstream Australians and coming to a deeper, more resilient, acknowledgement of the power of an Indigenous spirituality – and thus, the power of an Indigenous political and educational agenda. ‘3) The imagination of construction of a coherent... meaningful experience of the world.’ For Aboriginal Australians this ability to imagine and to construct a coherent and meaningful experience of the world is an innate part of our beings, a deeply rooted part of our environmental trust and an integral part
of our contribution to global societies. This ability has been degraded by mainstream and current systems of education, and our essential humanity has been subjected to all sorts of humiliation, abuse, and harm. Yet we stand here still, even within the educational systems that have wished to colonise our understandings. There will come a time when mainstream Australians will more readily listen to the conceptions of the world that come from the Aboriginal cultures of this country whose insight and ecological awareness may yet hold the key to national and global survival of the human species on our planet.

4) Fowler (accessed 31-01-2006, pp.8-9) also says ‘A developmental account of the growing capacities, in humans, for shaping and responding imaginatively to symbols, narratives...rituals that invite participation in the sacred... that touch the deepest dimensions of our relatedness to the holy.’ This last level of awareness and social action is very telling, as it goes directly to the core of Aboriginal spirituality and culture. This is the basis for future educational endeavours that wish to honour and respect traditional cultures. Traditional cultures are not a way of the past – they are a way for the future. They do not represent dead codes or ancient laws but a living and breathing spirit and intention that wishes to build human communities of
trust, families of health and wellness, and societies built on mutual caring for the ecosystem that can continue to sustain our lives and our economy.

The Creator Spirit: Challenging Mainstream Values

I have always believed that there has been a higher power in charge of my life. This has only deepened through the cause of listening to the narratives of family, friends, and in the fellowship of churches. I have become more enlightened through my work and study, such that spiritual autonomy is a pathway for acknowledging authority, and deepening and widening my imagination to perspectives of social awareness around the issues of cultural and spiritual experiences. This gives me a more meaningful experience of world coherence through the use of spiritual symbols, family narratives, and cultural rituals. Spiritual autonomy has enriched my life as it has encompassed a more personal journey and incorporated my spiritual world/s, God, Creator Spirit, Divine, which has helped develop my faith and belief in my virtues. This is obedience, humbleness and humanity. I have had a fulfilment of my physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural processes. My cognitive/spiritual self manifested more willingly by focusing on divine will, than my own self determination.
Myss (1996, p.224) notes that, 'we all reach a moment when we ask, who is in charge of my life? Why aren't things working out the way I want?' These questions can easily lead us into crisis, and into darkness. Myss continues to say, 'no matter how successful we are, at some point we will become conscious that we feel incomplete. Some unplanned power is sufficient to get us through a crisis.' I recognised that believing in a higher power has been integral to my spiritual and moral development. Coming out of the darkness into the light can be an ordeal. It can be mentally challenging. It may be as Myss (1996, p.268) says, 'the dark night of the soul... are necessary in order to form a fully conscious band with the Divine. At each stage come experiences of exquisite mystical transcendence as well as feelings of depression... and extraordinary isolation.'

And yet, as my case illustrates, a spiritual crisis eventually turned into a unique journey and an experience of coming to terms with all parts of myself. This meant that my values, attitudes and beliefs were being internally challenged, believing that there is only the truth of my emerging being in the sight of the Creator Spirit. But this realisation came later,
because part of the crisis of meaning was putting the Christian message into a wider social, historical and Aboriginal cultural context.

Christianity is not meant to dominate and to destroy Aboriginal spirituality, but for some the Christian message of Jesus can become a part of the Indigenous whole-world-view. In my story, I struggled as a Christian for years knowing that I also had an Indigenous Spiritual heart, the Dreamtime. My feeling was as though I was not truly myself, not my full self. The Christian message, and its European cultural components, needed to be challenged and changed to be made congruent with the whole of me. My Dreaming was in hiding for years and I became deeply spiritually anguished. I was possessed by fear and not being able to be open about this deep part of my culture, and my being, because of the fear of being rejected by fellow Christians and society. But I needed to pray and to develop and to explore my Indigenous spirituality. This indeed was a deeper more extensive result of educational malpractice, where our Aboriginal culture and spiritual life had been subjected to ridicule and attempted genocide.

Myss (1996, p.269) speaks to these issues when she says, ‘as Europeans encountered other cultures, it become clear that intense prayer, self-
exploration, and self-discipline led to mystical experiences in all cultures.’ But only a very few Europeans acknowledged this reality, and in the main this cultural respect does not appear to exist in mainstream educational circles. In my story, I decided to be first truthful to myself and I believed that the truth would set me free as the Christian scripture has said. For example, the New International Version (1985, p.1613) states, ‘then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’

So I decided to tell a close Indigenous friend of the challenges that I faced as a white skinned, blue eyed Aboriginal person. I could not move on and develop my Aboriginal spiritually otherwise. I needed to be accepted. I felt in that moment in telling my friend, in 1996, that I was Aboriginal, as though years of trans-generational oppression, shame, and guilt had been lifted from my shoulders. I could not realise then how much it would become one of the most tremendous blessings of my life to acknowledge and speak my Aboriginality, even-though difficulties had to be faced and fears relinquished in so many areas. Even in my generation it is not acceptable to acknowledge who we are. The politics are troubling.
For me also this was about the difficulty of how my Catholic Christian friends' opinions and beliefs would be very difficult to face. I needed to challenge, change, and embrace my Catholic religion and my culturally innate spirituality in a new and open way, but this process would take me another decade as these two worldviews are not as easily reconciled as one might expect. And in the process of reconciliation I have found that my Christian spirituality and beliefs have needed extensive renovation, particularly in ways that separate out (a) what is a spiritual teaching, verses (b) what constitutes a cultural/European value.

In this journey of redefining my faith, authors like Carolyn Myss (1996, p.269) have been helpful because these authors examine the Western Christian tradition and European cultural values while they critique and question the dominant male-directed views of what the tradition means. As such, these authors open up new conceptions and possible interpretations that may honour our lived experience more, and give us ways and means to redefine faith, theology, and learning itself. For example, she acknowledges that, ‘the word catholic alone connotes “universally” of thought, a particularly potent symbol, considering that the Roman Catholic religion was the original Christian Church... People around the world began
challenging the limits of their own religious traditions and explored the spiritual teaching of others.'

By saying the Roman Catholic was the original Christian church is perhaps a simplified statement, because in reality the history was more complex, as this one church was made up of hundreds of diverse societies, and the Christian religion was originally united but made up of the many Eastern orthodox faiths as well as the Western See of Rome. This unity in administration was broken apart by disagreement, such that after about the first 900 years of Christianity the East broke away from the West over issues of Papal authority. The Eastern bishops upheld their longstanding rights to self-govern their territories, and the Pope of Rome continued to gain and consolidate power in the Western regions. This is to make the simple point that there continue to be many ways to interpret the Christian message, to understand history, and this diversity can assist to enable Aboriginal students today to conceptualise a way of speaking our truth, our spiritual life, and our culture.
Learning through Crisis in Identity

In my story I started to explore and was able to embrace years of truth about myself which had been denied my grandmother and great grandparents. It was challenging to face prejudices of society. Such as this remark from one of my close European friends, ‘You are not Aboriginal, why would you even say that you are?! You are white skinned and blue eyes like me, and you are educated.’ The thick prejudices behind these words needed to be unpacked. The assumptions needed to be challenged. The devaluing of Aboriginal identity, culture and being as a person is just shocking to contemplate. The outright racism is as thick as thieves. Being Aboriginal was a part of me, something that I had to experience, accept, and embrace, as my grandmother had had to deny her Aboriginality -- but it was still part of her powerful and eternal spirit. She lives on in the Dreaming. She is one of our greatest Ancestors because she coped with the most terrible cultural oppression as best she could.

When I first found out that my grandmother was Aboriginal, I was so proud to be a part of a culture which had been around for thousands of years, with
all of its traditions, and spirituality which had been passed down from
generation to generation. As I became more internally aware the external
world seemed to become more and more judgemental of my spirituality and
cultural experiences. Christians were telling me that I needed to be careful of
expressing my Indigenous beliefs. One priest of my Church said, ‘Be
careful, as it is not safe to be expressing this type of spiritually.’ He
commented that these beliefs were a form of superstition. I found that this
was judgmental and that this did not fit in with how I saw God. At the time, I
explained to the priest that my Ancestors are worthy of just as much respect
as the ‘communion of saints’ in the Catholic tradition. I told him that in fact
my Ancestors went before me in faith, and regardless of what worldview
they had, they are a source of strength, power, and insight spiritually and
culturally. It was a lively discussion, and to my surprise the priest agreed to
respect my beliefs and was thankful to speak so openly with an Aboriginal
person, as he said this helped him to understand something about our culture
and beliefs that he had not realised previously. A God of love, God was
being placed in a box by my fellow believers.

As for me, I continued to explore Christianity and the Dreamtime. The more
I experienced the judgement from external influences, the more I
experienced my own internal judgements. I not only started to ask questions of, ‘who was I?’ but I seemed to be able to see the commonalities to both beliefs. On one hand, the saints in the church and how Christians prayed to them, and on the other hand my Indigenous Ancestors who are the saints of my Dreamtime and the ones who had journeyed before me to Creator Spirit. It is helpful to note that, for people who are struggling with these very issues, Myss (1996, p.270) acknowledges that ‘this shift from religion to spirituality is not simply a cultural trend. It is an archetypal reorganisation of our planetary community, which now has access to universal truths available through symbolic sight…’ In reality, our world today is made up of many varied cultures and beliefs. This is now a time when we can be enriched by cultural diversity, seek out our foundations in culture and identity, and form educational programs that assist people to reconstruct their own unique conceptions of the divine.

But the reality is that these explorations of faith and meaning are fearsome, and I found this time challenging in not belonging, not understanding, and not being at peace in life. The more I experienced these judgments of self and judgment of others the more my world seemed to close in on me. The more I experienced a spiritual awakening of my soul, the more I felt as

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though I was not even a part of what was going on around me. I became an actor on a stage and the stage was my place of work, my church, and the educational establishments which I belonged to. I started to realise a truth that no other person was showing me, but by searching myself. Like the Christian scriptures suggest (New International Version 1985, p.1452 verse, 7-7), ‘Ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find, knock and the door will be open to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.’ The more I knocked, asked and looked for answers, I realised that my inner turmoil was not about my spirituality – it was the external cultural prejudices, limitations and judgements which were being placed on top of my spirituality that made my way of seeing wrong and more wrong. I realised that I had to seek out what this judgement was, and this is what I was shown. Ironically, it was the Christian message itself that showed me how the Christians of today have been misguided by external judgements of people. For example, (New International Version 1985, p.1452 verse, 7-3), the scripture says, ‘Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.’
Through understanding judgement, I came to a peace about embracing my spirituality of my Aboriginal identity and the Dreamtime through the Christian scriptures. I also realised that people would judge no matter what. It was up to me not to judge myself and to accept myself, and to embrace all parts of my history and my struggles. I was able to now embrace a deeper understanding and newness of all the multi-facets of who I was. In this way, my Aboriginal Dreaming is now an integral part of my world, my spiritual beliefs, and my life.

**Recommendation for Indigenous Education**

In the above paragraphs I have mentioned the difficulties that I faced by schooling systems which are solely based on colonial discourse. We need to understand the importance of cultural difference and embrace indigenous philosophy in the classroom. As Battiste & Henderson (2000) cited in Kuokkanen (2006) suggests from the beginning the ecology in which we inhabit has taught indigenous people to have a kinship with the land with our religious/spiritual beliefs, this has instilled in the Indigenous races strong nourishing relationships with the existing ecosystems. The authors go on to say that the ecology in which we reside is more than just a place, more than
a country or home it is apart of who we are, we exist with and belong to the
ecology. Therefore in understanding the importance of Indigenous
philosophy, we can see how the educational systems, education curriculum,
and the immediate classroom needs to have Indigenous cultural
philosophies, so that Indigenous people can learn in their natural way by
being connected with the ecology. We need to feel it, see it, live it, and hear
it. It is apart of us. It is now up to the mainstream to realise the importance
of the connection and see it as an opportunity to be able to teach and learn
through a new style, a natural science.

At this time in our mutual post-colonial contexts, we share a common
responsibility to ensure better educational conditions for Aboriginal people
in Australia and in other countries colonised by the British Commonwealth.
Part of this opportunity lies in our increasing awareness of the many
environmental changes that challenge all people on earth to work together
towards helping each other change our society, the ways in which we learn,
and the values by which we can support cultural diversity.

Aboriginal people in Australia stand strong in an ancient heritage that
teaches wholistic approaches to education that are in tune with natural
environments. By living and coinciding with our new ecology, we are enacting, performing, and engaging in our post-colonial recreation that will not only improve Indigenous education but will also influence the ways that mainstream education is conducted. This can only improve education for all. By embracing and re-enacting what can be thought of as ‘old’ law, traditional law, we are in fact respecting and bringing forward into the contemporary world and the classroom the essential traditions by which Aboriginal people have found their ecological balance, spiritual strength, and enduring values of forming relations of trust and fidelity with Mother Earth. This kinship is an essential part of Indigenous people’s lives for many generations, and has the chance to live again in new ways in today’s world.

As this study suggests, over the course of the history of the creation of Australia, it has taken this long for many basic forms of acknowledgement and validation to be realised in relation to the traditional ways of Aboriginal First Nations. This historical invisibility is manifested in many ways in today’s classroom where pedagogy continues to be based in cultural assumptions and colonial values.
The hidden aspects of Aboriginal Australian cultures need to be more firmly supported in curriculum across Australia within broadly placed multicultural frameworks that encourage teachers and students to move beyond stereotypes and prejudicial assumptions. We stand on the threshold of embracing Aboriginal worldviews in a global way, during a post-colonial time of global Indigenous awakening. From little things big thing grow. From invisibility, disability, and issues of identity the changes that are possible relate to spirituality, and to the transformation of self, in relation to being one with our ecology and with Mother Earth.

**Conclusion**

These life experiences have humbled me to see life from both sides. It is truly an experience of being open-minded and experiencing the emotional journey as well as having a spiritual awareness. I needed to be able to bring all parts of my life into the foreground and let others know of my turmoil, anxiety, and the prejudice that I faced by being poor, culturally different, having a learning disability, and being subjected to homophobic connotations akin to name calling. As Denzin & Lincoln (2003, pp.222-223) support, like many people I find the prejudices of others unsettling and
painful at times. But that is how we learn by looking at our lives, applying it to a context, and making sense of what has happened. This is how learning happens. Through these difficult experiences we gain tolerance and humility. The authors suggest that we become ashamed of how much we are excluded from our cultural, spiritual, and educational experiences; we need to see and be seen for the strength of who we are, and not to stay hidden from view. We do not have to run from the fear or anxiety that we feel. We need to grow and learn from it.

Denzin & Lincoln (2003) also suggest that these experiences of racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia, and learning disabilities not only touch us as individuals but touch our communities, schools, families and friends—all of us. We can not hide from these experiences. We are and have all been complicit in some way. No one is immune, invulnerable. It is important to become exposed to local stories and narratives that bring our worlds of experience together, thus making what is unknown and known to us. We can share concrete information of people’s lives who have been under represented or not represented at all. This shows us how narrow-minded our understanding and knowledge of the world tends to be. But I believe that this
path of learning can be edifying, spiritually uplifting, and perhaps also life altering.

This thesis was intended to open doors of healing and insight for self in relation to history, education, and for future generations of students and teachers. This journey has been like sitting with an old friend, sharing stories as medicine, and coming to terms with my life in the contexts of this learning, unlearning, and relearning. From this process there has been many shifts in thinking, insights gained that have inspired me to continue in the path of healing, teaching, and learning. In Figure 6:2 the key recommendations coming from this research are offered for your consideration.

**Figure 6:2 Key Recommendations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For Teachers:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage the learning style of each student, acknowledging and actively supporting their cultural identity and the exploration and growth in this identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Remember we are learning too... teachers can reflect on their own cultural, linguistic, and historical background to reclaim their sense of identity – from a strong basis of identity teachers are more likely to encourage student’s identity development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When children are in groups, remember to support and encourage the individual child’s strengths and talents – groups can be the primary place of prejudice and shame or the places of peer-support and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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learning – how a teacher uses these times of group engagement make or break children’s identity

• Build confidence in Aboriginal children, understanding that their styles of communication may differ from tribe to tribe, their spirituality and family identities will also differ – being open, and staying open, to diversity of cultural identities builds a bridge of understanding – you may become a part of the extended family, and as such, share a mutual respect based in cultural law

• Let children tell their stories, because sometimes they are sad stories. This also develops their confidence, and allows them to form good relations with an older person in a position of authority.

• Do not be afraid to share your story. To be authentic. To let down your guard at certain times by being human, compassionate, and understanding while being strong, firm, and offering guidance.

• Self-disclosure is really important on the part of teachers, as this shows a mutual sharing of our lives in the context of cultural law. The connections we build through our stories are integral to many Indigenous cultural contexts.

• These principles can be applied in many contexts including school counselling, and in adult education, where learners face many similar challenges and opportunities – learn to challenge your embedded beliefs and attitudes and do not be afraid to acknowledge bias and prejudice in yourself and in your teaching methods.

• By acknowledging prejudice and realising that we are all on this long journey of learning, unlearning, and relearning, we are all involved in this post-colonial adventure – and we all share responsibility for more positive outcomes in our education.

For students of teaching and for teachers, as well as for my colleagues in the field of counselling and in school counselling, I hope that this work will be used as a tool for understanding people from minority groups, and to assist in opening an awareness of what minority students might be experiencing. This includes the difficulties that students and all Aboriginal people often
face in even accessing the most basic forms of care and consideration in the educational cultures of this country.

It is amazing for me to be where I am today – to be a teacher, counsellor, and life coach and to have come this far in my educational journey. After all, I am first and foremost a member of my family, tribe, and Aboriginal Nation. I embrace all parts of my family heritage. This identity informs, challenges and inspires my educational journey at all levels. From this place of narrative autoethnographic reflection on the nature of education in cultural contexts, there is no doubt that Australian schools and universities have a very long journey ahead to make this modern nation state more humane and just for Aboriginal citizens.
Epilogue

White Wolf

Dear Tess
You walked your walk with me
   Over the days
   Over the months
   Over the years
You brought light, hope and love into my life
   And then I let you
Teach me kindness and
   You taught me respect
You taught me to have more compassion
You were there, when no one else was
   You gave me hope in my despair
You helped me to keep going on
   When life was
      Hard
      Difficult
      And lonely
You will always be
   My companion
      Friend
      Family
   And always my angel
Thankyou
For coming into my life
   To extend Gods
      Love to me.
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