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Declaration

Title: “A Journey with Woolum Bellum Koorie Open Door Education (KODE) School. Its Life Cycle in Meeting the Educational needs of Aboriginal Children.”

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Declaration by the candidate

I certify that:
This thesis is entirely my own work, and due acknowledgement have been made where appropriate. The work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award. The content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program. Any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party has been acknowledged.

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Abstract
Woolum Bellum KODE (Koorie Open Door Education) School is located at Morwell in the Latrobe Valley of Victoria. The school is unique in that its curriculum is centred on the Gunnai/Kurnai language and culture of the traditional owners. The aim of this thesis is to describe and tell the history of Woolum Bellum School. My research questions are: 1. what led to the establishment of the Woolum Bellum KODE School? What are the critical success factors of the school attaining autonomy within the Victorian State Education system?

The story of Woolum Bellum and its journey is important in the context of sharing knowledge. It exemplifies how a school like Woolum Bellum can be autonomous and how it presents a challenge as it comes to terms with what works and why. As a community we can assess the overall success of the school in terms of outcomes for the community. The benefits are seen in the generation of young people who attended the school over the past fifteen years. Their experience of schooling at Woolum Bellum as opposed to their experiences in the mainstream system amounts to significant successes.

My ways of knowing have informed how I have used a method of research that respects my knowledge gifted from my Elders and Ancestors. My indigenous ways respected in using Dadirri as a methodology for narrative inquiry in research underpins and informs respect for honouring an indigenous paradigm; with tools within that paradigm to guide and shape my research. My cultural ways of knowing, my guidance in reciprocal and respectful relationships, talking together in circles, telling stories in conversations, and understanding community are at the core of these ways of knowing.

My quilts crafted with multiple layers of knowledge offer the community a visual representation of the journey. They share the narrative and knowledge in conversations and in stories. They are relational and interrelated and they interpret the issues from my ways of knowing.

This is a story I have shared with others already who believed in the possibilities for a Woolum Bellum School. Like me, they welcomed the challenges, the responsibilities that came with it to our community and Elders. And like me, the community held on to the dream that time and through listening, through learning and with knowledge, the possibility remains.
## Contents

Declaration ................................................................................................................................. 2
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ 3
Contents ..................................................................................................................................... 4
List of Illustrations .................................................................................................................... 6
Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 7

My Experience at School with Western Knowledge .............................................................. 11
Learning Both Ways .................................................................................................................. 13
My Story .................................................................................................................................... 14

Chapter One: Namma (What is) the Beginning-An Introduction ........................................... 18
Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 19
Rationale .................................................................................................................................... 21
Western Education System and Failure to Meet Needs of Koorie Children ......................... 24
The Emergence of the KODE (Koorie Open Door Education) Schools ................................. 30
My Role in the Early Days of Woolum Bellum ....................................................................... 31
My Official Role: Chairperson of Woolum Bellum Committee of Management ..................... 33
Lessons from the Issues ........................................................................................................... 37

Chapter 2: Methodology ........................................................................................................... 39
Listening to Indigenous Paradigms .......................................................................................... 42
Quilt-making as a Site for Story-telling .................................................................................... 44
Storytelling on Quilts: Other Indigenous Voices ..................................................................... 45
The Elements of my Research Enquiry: my Principles of Research ......................................... 46
1. Cultural Ways of Knowing ................................................................................................. 47
2. Reciprocal and Respectful Relationships ......................................................................... 48
3. Talking Circles .................................................................................................................. 48
4. Stories in Conversation ..................................................................................................... 50
5. Community Protocols ...................................................................................................... 51

Chapter 3: History of Woolum Bellum School ......................................................................... 54
Enablers that became Disablers to the Success of the School .................................................. 55
Decision Making Processes ...................................................................................................... 56
Policies Input and Underpinning Framework .......................................................................... 56
Management and Leadership Integral Components ............................................................... 57
Curriculum Framework for Both Ways Learning .................................................................... 58
A Brief History of Woolum Bellum .......................................................................................... 59
Understanding Traditional Organisational Life and the Place of Learning ............................. 63
Four Generations of Surviving Off the Missions ..................................................................... 65
Movement of Families from Lake Tyers Mission to Drouin, Morwell, Moe and Traralgon ................................................................................................................................. 66

Chapter 4: My Quilts as a Narrative Medium ........................................................................... 69
This chapter takes the reader into the quilts. These quilts made as artefacts of knowledge tell the story using my ways of knowing. I focus on how they express how I learnt these things from my family and why it is important to share this knowledge. I am introducing the reader to the key elements of success for the school and the disablers with the impact these have on the school and community. I present each quilt as one but show how the relational between emerges to enlighten the possibilities of and an understanding of a different world view. I give an understanding of Indigenous knowledge in relation to an education that is related and interrelated. I present on the second quilt the story on panels. They give a social background, the establishment of the school, the key enablers, the importance of curriculum and language, the changes and turmoil and distress of the school and its community. They
use my ways of knowing to give meaning to this distress, the impact on community and the outcomes of external troubles and finally the final dismissal. ................................. 70
Creating a Site of Knowledge: I am a quilt maker. I make quilts................................. 72
Quilt Number One ........................................................................................................ 72
Indigenous Knowledge: Foundation of the School................................................... 72
Quilt Number Two ........................................................................................................ 73
Unmasking the Issues ................................................................................................. 73
Quilt Number Three .................................................................................................... 73
Listening Properly: Indigenous Voices in Education .................................................. 73
Designing This Quilt ................................................................................................. 74
Sharing Cultural Knowledge .................................................................................... 77
The Second Quilt: Unmasking the Issues .................................................................. 78
A Fabric Narrative of the Woolum Bellum Story....................................................... 78
The Third Quilt: Elements with Knowledge and Enablers of Success ...................... 85
Chapter 5: Conclusion ............................................................................................... 88
What I Have Learned ................................................................................................. 90
Significance of my Work ........................................................................................... 92
List of Illustrations

Figure 4: Image of Distress ........................................................................................................ 57
Figure 5: Images of Language, Stories, Places of Significance & History .................. 58
Figure 1: My first quilt .......................................................................................................... 69
Figure 2: My Second Quilt .................................................................................................. 69
Figure 3: My Third Quilt ..................................................................................................... 70
Figure 6: Bogong Moths ...................................................................................................... 75
Figure 7: Sources of Food .................................................................................................. 76
Figure 8: Cumbungee or the Tarook .................................................................................. 76
Figure 9: The Mission Days ............................................................................................... 79
Figure 10: Woolum Bellum School .................................................................................... 79
Figure 11: The Crows ......................................................................................................... 81
Figure 12: Jiddelick ............................................................................................................ 81
Figure 13: History of Genocide ........................................................................................ 81
Figure 14: The Aboriginal Flag ........................................................................................ 82
Figure 15: The Willy Willy ............................................................................................... 82
Figure 16: Disillusion ......................................................................................................... 83
Figure 17: Cleansing ........................................................................................................... 84
Figure 18: Lost Opportunities ............................................................................................ 84
Introduction

*Education is always political. Education is always about possibilities and hope* (Linda Tuhiwai Smith 2005)

Education is one of the many challenges for Aboriginal people in a western society. It will always be political, but a school like Woolum Bellum clearly shows what is possible for Aboriginal children and gives us hope for what might come.

The journey with a school like Woolum Bellum School has, without doubt, challenged the processes, policies and perceptions of success in the Victorian State Education system. It has been a journey of political and moral imperative, to try something new with goodwill and intention to make a change. However, the short term fix, the flawed measurements of success and the undeniable inability to genuinely and respectfully listen to create long term possibilities has for the moment, passed. This has been evident in the review process, the school management, the protocols and processes of the instruments of government and most glaringly the manner in which the players in the system played their hands.

The place of a school like Woolum Bellum has a historical context that shaped its context and from which its foundations developed. Denial of cultural inclusion, and entrenched racist attitudes within policies and processes, continue to deny Aboriginal children rights to their heritage. This is a reflection of a mono-cultural education system that has for Aboriginal children had various strategies in assimilation as the main intent.
Education as an instrument of change to assimilate our children dates back to The Aboriginal Protection Act of 1869. Under this Act the powers given to government and caretakers on the missions, in Regulation 2, regarding ‘the education and care of the children’, was the province of the state. These powers determined a destiny of denial and demoralisation for our people.

Further these powers, given to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and then to the Commonwealth Government, made decisions for Aboriginal people and forged a destiny embedded in racism, where culturally relevant education policies and practices were viewed with contempt. Aboriginal children were excluded from mainstream schools until the early 1930s. And, from the 1950s prejudice and racist attitudes of society and teachers determined the abilities of Aboriginal children in schools. For my father and others, this was exemplified in their placement in the remedial class.

Over successive decades Aboriginal education issues have been researched and commissioned. These reports generated new strategies, new programs, new policy, and improved implementation practices. Since the mission period the aims of education have sought to make Aboriginal children fit the system and the system fit the objectives of policies entrenched in assimilation. And so, the cycles go on: the mission period with the apprenticeship system, the removal of children into homes, and into domestic service well away from the influences of their families and their culture. In the story of children from Woolum Bellum and my own schooling for the past 50 years, in my parent’s lifetime and in my grandparent’s lifetime, it can argued that realistically, very little has changed.

1 In the 1950’s an assimilation policy put forward by Sir Paul Hasluck, a government Minister proposed that Aboriginal people would eventually “attain the same manner of living and the same privileges of citizenship as white Australians” (Bolton, G 2004) Bolton noted that Hasluck premised this policy on the belief that Australia would best be served by a largely homogenous people. This pervasive thinking underpinned all policy decisions for Aboriginal people.
To make a school like Woolum Bellum autonomous in the Victorian Education system, I have shared through my story and on my quilts the elements of change for the system, the layers of knowledge of the possibilities, and the multiple layers of knowing based on genuine respect and honesty, to listen.

The story of Woolum Bellum and its journey thus far is important in the context of sharing knowledge; about what it takes to work, how listening and respectful understanding can provide the way. The story also exemplifies how a school like Woolum Bellum can be autonomous and how it presents a challenge as it comes to terms with what does work and why. As a community we can assess the overall success of the school in terms of outcomes for the community. The benefits are seen in the generation of young people who attended the school over the past fifteen years. Their experience of schooling at Woolum Bellum as opposed to their experiences in the mainstream system amounts to significant successes.

My ways of knowing have informed how I have used a method of research that respects my knowledge gifted from my Elders, and Ancestors. My indigenous ways respected in using Dadirri as a methodology for narrative inquiry in research underpins and informs respect for honouring an indigenous paradigm; with tools within that paradigm to guide and shape my research. My cultural ways of knowing, my guidance in reciprocal and respectful relationships, talking together in circles, telling stories in conversations, and understanding community are at the core of these ways of knowing.

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This is a story I have shared with others already who believed in the possibilities for a Woolum Bellum School. Like me, they welcomed the challenges, the responsibilities that came with it to our community and Elders. And like me, the community held on to the dream that time and through listening, through learning and with knowledge, the possibility remains.

We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree the sap is still flowing and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree we have endured the flames and we still have the power to be re-born. Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting. We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We ourselves have spent many years learning about the white man’s ways; we have learned to speak the white man’s language; we have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways.

Miriam Rose Ungunmerr 1999
My Experience at School with Western Knowledge

I spent my early years of schooling in Club Terrace and then Cann River in Far East Gippsland. My many cousins, uncles, aunties and grandparents all lived up the road. I remember learning in the history classes at school that Captain Cook discovered this land. As a child I argued with the teachers about this version of history, knowing a different story from my father, my mother, and my grandparents. They taught us how our people lived on this land from time immemorial, long before the white people came, long before Captain Cook; this is our land and our people, the custodians of the land. I questioned why we were taught that our people were the noble savages\(^2\) and that the image presented to us at school was the blackfella standing on one leg holding a spear. My father told us when he was at school he was told a similar story of discovery and of the savagery of the Aborigines. He too, knew a different story, and decided at a very early age that he wasn’t going to an education environment which told a white view of history.

This recollection of my experience of curriculum and knowledge in a western education system remained with me throughout my schooling. I realised then that there was another story to tell and another way of knowing that was our children’s inherent right to learn.

My parents knew we had to go to school but they ensured we were taught both ways. We were taught our Aboriginal ways whilst learning to live in the western ways of the world. Our identity, our cultural ways, practices, and processes our parents told knowing who we were and where we came from us would help us understand and survive in a dominant culture. I enjoyed learning, I loved to read. My father recalls that I always had my head in a book.

\(^2\) This concept first appeared in a play by Dreyden in 1672. Rousseau, a philosopher in 1755 argued that men were in ‘a state of nature’ before being corrupted by civilisation and society. He was seen as promoting the notion of the noble savage. A concept which continues to perpetuate the western view of Aboriginal people.
I believe school is an important place in a child’s experience. It is a place they can grow in knowledge and be supported to reach true potential but also a place for learning. The children at Woolum Bellum School come from generations of their families who lived on the missions under the policies of protection and assimilation. At least four generations of families were moved into townships across Gippsland. In their learning, they were told a similar story of discovery of this land by Captain Cook and that their people were savages.

The potential for the Woolum Bellum School inspired me. I believed Woolum Bellum School could give our children and future generations an education environment which respected and celebrated their cultural heritage, a learning environment which respected their cultural values and one which enabled our children to reach their true potential. This is the dream held also by my father. Woolum Bellum School could become the very real possibility of achieving that dream.

In the early 1900s, my great grandfather David Mullett was a fill-in teacher at Lake Condah Mission in western Victoria; he taught reading, writing and arithmetic to the children. My great great grandmother Emily Stephens was also a fill-in teacher at Ramahyuck Mission in Gippsland. Living on the mission under the Aboriginal Protection Act, she wrote letters to the Aboriginal Protection Board to raise concerns on behalf of her people and to protest about their treatment on the mission.

I am also a teacher trained in the western education system but, more importantly, I am a Ngarigo/Gunnai woman. As a mother, grandmother and auntie I am privileged to understand and learn from the ways of our old people and to learn from both worlds. This is knowledge I am accountable for, and I am sharing with the community. This responsibility is to my parents, to my elders, and ancestors for the privilege of being taught their ways. I do not do
this because I choose to be privileged. I am doing this because I have been
given a great gift and am honoured to have this knowledge. Through this study,
I will share some of this knowledge with community.

I will tell the journey of the Woolum Bellum School through three quilts: The
quilts I have made as part of my study are visual representations of the
narrative about the school. Knowledge from both worlds informs the narrative
but the underpinning story is clear, when knowledge is heard, real change is
possible.

Like my quilts, my reflections on this experience has been crafted to take the
reader into a story from my own experiences of living in both worlds; learning
from my parents and our ways of knowing, and from my experiences of
schooling in a western education system. In this study, I am able to move
between both worlds with an understanding of the spaces in between. Telling
the journey through the narrative of a school like Woolum Bellum makes room
for the voice in spaces in between to be heard. Deep listening is the only
respectful way to achieve real change and real outcomes for our children.

Learning Both Ways

To understand our ways of knowing and listening properly in this research I
want to give the reader an understanding of my own journey in relation to this
story and the way in which I honour knowledge as an Aboriginal person. As I
worked closely with the school to follow the decision making processes which
have influenced and grown to become a learning environment with the real
potential to meet the educational and social and cultural needs of the children
and community. To be true to my ways of knowing I have made the quilts as a
way of sharing the story and passing on the knowledge for others to learn. I
have also used other strategies of inquiries in this study to tell the story.
As you, the reader listens to this story you will understand more about my ways of knowing. How this has formed the basis for the need to create a learning environment which has listened, and has heard the spaces in between. My story of how I am, who I am and how that has enmeshed me in this story is built upon the principles of research important to me as an Indigenous researcher. In this journey with this school it is important for you to understand this relationship, my role, and how these quilts tell the story.

**My Story**

As Aboriginal children we lived in two worlds, learning both ways and learning to value the knowledge learnt in both ways. This ‘both ways’ was important to my parents as they had grown up with their families who lived on the fringes of society and their ways of knowing were given to them from their families. They were not a part of the mainstream society in their lives; they were excluded from learning about how ‘white people’ viewed the world, and how the world existed for them. Both ways for us as children was living in communities with both our Aboriginal families and learning their ways of knowing and thinking. It meant also participating in the ‘mainstream world’ of going to school, Sunday school, Brownies and Guides, and learning about the other world from our interactions with teachers and other children. It also meant knowing the Aboriginal ways of thinking, behaving and knowledge from our parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles and extended family.

From my learning I have reflected on the needs of Aboriginal children living in two worlds and the need to learn both ways. Woolum Bellum provides the link for our children to learn both ways in today’s environment. In the context of Aboriginal schooling ‘both ways’ is referred to by educationalist as a learning style. This is based on a theory proposed by Harris (1990). His theory of Aboriginal learning styles heavily influenced educational thinking and practices in Aboriginal education. This ‘both ways’ education at Batchelor College, Northern Territory observed by Baumgart (1995) noted that this was a shared
process between Aboriginal and Western knowledge which respected Aboriginal knowledge, the learning processes and practices. While my learning stems from my knowledge and understanding of both ways and the power of being able to work within and between both I am acutely aware that reality for me is strongly influenced by my ways of knowing as an Aboriginal person.

My experience of schooling was mostly influenced by my parents. They lived in an environment where they had little or no western schooling. In their experience of schooling, they were given low expectations for themselves and negative learning environments from which they found no incentives nor desire to be at school. My mother remembers her mother teaching her to read from the bible as this was their only source and reference for English language. My maternal grandmother (ngujarn) didn’t read or write, she grew up in the bush away from mainstream society and welfare eyes, she learned the old ways from the old people, and the family. The family was transient seeking seasonal employment, mostly bush work. My mother’s life followed a similar pattern. They spoke Ngarigo language. Her people knew their Dreaming stories of creation gifted from our Ancestral Beings. They understood the world through their knowledge, and from their stories in ceremonies, dance, and song. They understood the world from their ancestors. These are the learnings my mother had as her schooling.

As for my father he left home at 13 years old to make his own way in life. His mother had a transient life living in many places and often between relationships. My father grew up under the guardianship of his aunt, his mother’s sister. His education was in the old ways. These are teachings of the Elders who passed on knowledge about how to live on the land, how to understand the spirit world, how to learn about the gathering of food, the laws of the people and ways of thinking and behaving from the old uncles. He spent his youth moving between extended family, communities and learning from the old people. In his youth he lived and experienced hardship and struggled living on the fringes of society in places like Jackson’s Track, near rubbish dumps, on
the river banks with his family where there was no employment, no proper housing or services, no government hand outs and the removal of his brothers into institutional care. These experiences shaped his life as a young man and his learning from the old people was more valuable to him than an education from the mainstream system.

My father worked in the wider community mostly doing seasonal work and in the timber industry, this was a hard life and he was a very hard worker. My mother cared for eight children and we all shared the seasonal work, mostly picking beans.

Living in two worlds meant going to a mainstream school. For our parents this was as important as learning our ways and our knowledge. My parents recognised very early that if we were to be survivors and for our own good we needed both ways and that our children and grandchildren needed to learn both.

As a child I enjoyed schooling, and developed a hunger for knowledge. Living at Club Terrace and surrounded by cousins, we maintained our learning in both worlds throughout our childhood, teenage and adult life. The ability to look at issues and make decisions is still based on the knowledge from our Elders and the information we gained from living in two worlds.

I began working in the education environment as a Koorie Educator in 1975 at 19 years old, and then had an opportunity to attend university which I fully embraced. I was a young divorced mother at 22 years old with two children and wanted to follow my ambitions to become a teacher, like my great grandfather David Mullett, and my great great grandmother Emily Stephens. I became a student teacher and began a Diploma of Education (Primary) while working in a local primary school with significant numbers of Koorie children. At the time I taught sections of the curriculum relating to Koorie content as I continued my own education. I completed a Bachelor of Arts (Social Science), followed by a
Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) and Masters in Education (specialising in Indigenous Education). Over the years I have worked as an educator, as a teacher in primary and secondary schools, at TAFE and University, mostly concentrating on the development of Koorie studies at all levels. I have also spent a significant period of time working as a Manager in policy implementation of strategies in the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP), as well as in ABSTUDY policy. I have over the years developed a strong interest in meeting the educational needs of Koorie community through curriculum development within a learning environment that valued Aboriginal sense of place and space.
Chapter One: Namma (What is) the Beginning-An Introduction

This chapter introduces the story and the question I am attempting to address. I will discuss my reflections on the experience telling the story using quilts as a narrative medium. As an Indigenous researcher I am introducing how an Indigenous research paradigm is congruent with my ways of knowing as a framework for my study. I am also introducing Dadirri (Deep Listening) as a methodology for narrative inquiry which I have used as a method to address the question. My rationale for undertaking this study is a powerful and important motivational factor to creating a space for change. The quilts express the visual form of my rationale. I am introducing my role as an Aboriginal educator knowledgeable in both worlds to the story of the Woolum Bellum School. I am discussing the emergence of the KODE concept and the initial establishment of Woolum Bellum School at Morwell and again my role in the process and as Chairperson in the turmoil of the issues. Finally I am introducing the issues that have created the need to address the future of the school.

This chapter has been introductory to the development of the story from my position as an Aboriginal researcher; the methodology for this narrative inquiry, the significant role as an Aboriginal educator in the emergence and establishment of the school. In particular, it introduces the visual presentation of the quilt in telling the story.

In the next chapter, my focus is on using an Indigenous research paradigm in my enquiries and how using Dadirri (Deep Listening) as a methodology honours Indigenous knowledge. I intend that you the reader share my personal story to gain an understanding of my ways of knowing as an Aboriginal person and how listening properly informs my principles of research. The creation of space is discussed in relation to other ways of knowing and relating to the world.
The next chapter uses the voice of being an Aboriginal person referring to the epistemology and ontology of being an Aboriginal person and my principles of research which inform the study. The images of the quilts are presented as the sites for telling the story of the Woolum Bellum School.

I will be writing about my view of the experience of a Koorie Open Door School (KODE), Woolum Bellum, its history as a concept and the move to autonomy in a Federation of KODE schools. Woolum Bellum is one of four schools in Victoria and operates on a model of schooling aimed at addressing educational disadvantage of indigenous students. The focus of my research is an exploration the past, present and future of the Woolum Bellum KODE and what needs to be done for the KODE to become autonomous. Current and previous research demonstrates the lack of success of many Indigenous students in the education system and its approach to the education of Aboriginal children.

**Research Questions**

The aim of this research is to describe the Woolum Bellum KODE School's journey thus far. My research questions are:

1. What has led to the establishment of the Woolum Bellum KODE School?
2. What are the critical success factors of the school attaining autonomy within the Victorian state education system?

Describing the success factors in my view will make a valuable contribution to knowledge about creating a model for success for Aboriginal education. Understanding this journey of Woolum Bellum School will hopefully assist in changing policy decisions, practices and processes that currently underpin the mainstream education system.

I was drawn to research articulated in Shawn Wilson’s PhD *Research as Ceremony: Articulating an Indigenous Research Paradigm* (2004).
In this approach, he uses a strategy of inquiry which respects the Indigenous way of learning by watching and doing. He refers to relational accountability which requires him to form reciprocal and respectful relationships in the community where he is conducting research (relationship building is an important aspect of Indigenous research), interviews with individual participants and focus groups discussions (using traditional talking circles) based on the ideal of respect where everyone has an equal chance to speak and be heard.

As a framework for research, an Indigenous research paradigm is underpinned by Indigenous ontology and epistemology as a set of beliefs about reality. In my research I am discussing how an Indigenous paradigm asks what reality is as a set of beliefs. What is Indigenous ontology as a theory of the nature of reality and therefore existence? What is the “real world” from which each of us observes? Are there different worlds from which reality informs our beliefs? I refer to Indigenous ways of knowing as reality based on a set of beliefs. Ontology asks: what is ‘real’ in the world from which I draw my beliefs and which frames my thinking?

In a similar way, epistemology which is the study of the nature of thinking and knowing also frames my research. It therefore informs me how we come to have knowledge and how we know that we know something. In the way that I think about ontology and what reality is then how and what I believe to be real is what and how I think about that reality. Epistemology defines for me “how do I know what I think is real?” because I know from my ways of knowing as an Aboriginal person, and from that knowledge my ways of thinking about the world.

My study is qualitative in nature, and recognises the responsibility of an Indigenous researcher to honour their ontologies and epistemology. The method of my research is Narrative Inquiry and uses a storytelling approach with a foundation in Dadirri as a way of listening respectfully. This narrative
follows the story of the Woolum Bellum School, interwoven with my own personal story, with depth and context from those on their journey with the school.

**Rationale**

My study is one experience of a Koorie Open Door Education (KODE) school, Woolum Bellum, its history as a concept and the move to autonomy under a Federation of KODE schools.

Woolum Bellum is one of four KODE schools in Victoria and operates on a model of schooling aimed at addressing educational disadvantage of Indigenous students. The focus of the research will be what has been learned and what needs to be done for Woolum Bellum KODE.

Current and previous research demonstrates the lack of success of many Indigenous students in the education system and its approach to achieving education outcomes for Aboriginal children. In the National Indigenous Times March 2009 a small but significant article tells the same story that has been told over several decades.

Improving retention rates has been at the centre of change in the system to engage Koorie young people in fulfilling their own potential. Partington, Harrison, Godfrey and Wyatt (1997) address issues in relation to why it is important for Aboriginal children to stay at school and succeed. In all states the statistics show whilst there is an increased level of participation in Years 11 and Years 12 there still remains a significant dropout rate of Aboriginal students in the first three years of schooling at secondary level. Rather than identify factors contributing to these dropout rates their focus was to make sense of the issue by turning their attention to cultural understanding, and relationships in school that may contribute to improving retention for Aboriginal children.
More recently in Victoria, under the Wannik strategy launched in 2008, several strategies aimed at improved outcomes emphasised better relationships in schools and with community to address the existing gaps in education for Aboriginal children.

The KODE concept provides an educating approach which addresses both the education and cultural needs of Aboriginal children. While there has been significant improvement since the implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) and greater responsibility by the states, there are still many issues to work through.

The Woolum Bellum KODE School’s progress to date has made significant insights and inroads to what seem like intangible issues but which are really strong and important for Indigenous education. These include changing parental and carers’ attitudes to schooling, supporting positive experiences at school for their children, and embracing a school which recognises cultural values and a relevant curriculum. The teachers at the school developed strong relationships with the students and were achieving successful outcomes in increased attendance, improved literacy levels, and a greater awareness of urban Aboriginal children’s lives.

The Woolum Bellum KODE School’s journey towards achieving autonomy was a valuable contribution to the knowledge gained in demonstrating success; it will also assist in policy decision, practices and processes that currently underpin the education system. Factors such as leadership, curriculum, and the role of community in education decision making will be critical factors in the long term success of the KODE concept and vital to the journey of becoming an autonomous learning environment for Aboriginal children. To date no research has been explored in these elements of the KODE concept nor have they been examined in depth. But this research is critical because a researcher would make known the voice of community in these decisions and highlight the
aspirations of the children, while the parents and carers become more confident and stronger in articulating educationally what they want from an education system.

When the KODE opened in 1995 I wanted to ensure that those involved took the opportunity to develop a curriculum which could meet the needs of the students. I became an active member of Woolum Bellum Committee of Management and assisted to negotiate with the community Bataluk Cultural Trail Management group the desire to use the Bataluk Cultural Trail to develop a culturally relevant curriculum at the school. Development of the Bataluk curriculum could be developed to meet the educational and cultural needs of the Koorie students. This was a key feature of the school. This opportunity would provide a pathway to enable the students to learn both ways equipped in knowing about their country, their language, their knowledge, and to understand the wider world they lived in. Most urban Aboriginal children live in a marginalised world of being Koorie, not assimilated, not having their own language, own identity and the knowledge and strength that comes with being able to know who they are and where they come from.

I assisted to develop the Bataluk Curriculum specifically to meet the educational and cultural needs of Aboriginal students. This curriculum is based on local sites of knowledge which was delivered across key learning areas in the Curriculum Standards Frameworks (CSF) Framework in an appropriate way.

The Bataluk Curriculum was trialled in 1996 and 1997. Based on whole school themes, the curriculum recognised the connections between fields of learning, skills and knowledge. It also functioned to broaden learning approaches and outcomes. The themes were derived from two distinct and related social and geographic phases of the curriculum: the Bataluk Cultural Trail and Global Links. These two phases allowed students to reflect on, compare and reinforce their learning. It allowed students to broaden their context of personal experiences and provided the opportunity for reflection, comparison and
appreciation of differences. The curriculum contained a total of twelve themes altogether which was used over a three year cycle.

More importantly, all staff were responsible for the management, planning, and implementation of the curriculum. Teams of teachers were responsible for the development of the theme based units of work using areas of expertise and interest. Students and staff were engaged with members of the community to visit sites and gain knowledge which formed the basic theme planning developed. The curriculum sub-committee was made up of interested staff and members of the Committee of Management (COM). Portfolios of work were used to discuss progress and achievement of students with families and community. In 2000 this framework was superseded by the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and the Bataluk Curriculum adapted to be integrated into the new framework.

Western Education System and Failure to Meet Needs of Koorie Children

Education has been seen as a key to overcoming serious disadvantage for the future. Our experience of the system is that cultural and educational needs are seriously undermet and curriculum has been identified as an area which impacts on the retention rate of Indigenous students and the relevant nature of schooling. Curriculum in education has been the instrument to teach values in society, to impart knowledge and prepare children and adults for their participation in the society in which they live. Education in this society is based on western ideologies, and the reinforcement of the dominant western cultural values, with successive changes in both educational policies and practices to meeting the changing needs of society. This, however, has not necessarily met the educational, social or cultural needs of Indigenous people.

This need has significant implications for addressing the social and economic disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal people. However, experience and
statistics on Aboriginal education has clearly shown that an ability to meet
cultural and educational needs of many Aboriginal children is still of serious
concern.

The Wannik Strategy a recent education policy agreement in Victoria, between
the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and
Department of Education, and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides
statistics on retention rates of Koorie students. In 2007, of the 700 Koorie kids
in schooling, ‘16% of Koorie students leave school between Years 9 and 10, 22%
between Years 10 and 11 and 41% between years 11 and 12’ (DEECD, 2008).

Curriculum has been identified as an area which can impact on the retention
rate of Indigenous students and the relevant nature of schooling. The challenge
for the mainstream system, in light of this, is therefore providing a school
which meets the educational requirements of Aboriginal children. This has
been well noted by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (Battiste 2002,

The experience of Woolum Bellum School in a mono-cultural education system
has presented a challenge to the western system and the world view which
underpins the knowledge system contained within. It seems that the challenge
for this system over the past century has been to get Aboriginal students to buy
into the western system. Furthermore they suggest change needs to occur
where non-Aboriginal people can learn to exist in co-existence of multiple
world view and knowledge systems, and understand and relate to the world in
its multiple dimensions.

The challenge of schools in a contemporary society that feature educational
practices that include Aboriginal ways of teaching is reflected upon by
respected Aboriginal writers such as Cajete (1994), and Battiste (2002),
Kawagley & Barnharht(2005). Their perspective is reflective of the purpose of
education for Aboriginal people as a connection to their heritage and how this
can be achieved. They take the view of using diverse and flexible teaching methods around an Aboriginal view of knowing, and that Aboriginal people live in relation to one another. Hence biological and physical survival is ‘interwoven with the communities we create and Aboriginal education is based on such relationships and respect for these patterns and rhythms’ (Cajete1994, p.133)

The experiences of Aboriginal students in education systems around the world have, and in Barnhardt & Kawagley (2005) refer to a real lack of enthusiasm for the experience and conventional form - an aversion. Battiste(2002) suggests is attributed to culture, rather than ‘lack of innate intelligence, or ingenuity’ on the part of the students’ (2005,p11). Furthermore, she quotes from findings of Norris-Tull & Norris-Tull (1998) that ‘the curricula, teachers, assessment strategies associated with mainstream schooling and that does not recognise or appreciate indigenous interdependent universe and the importance of place in the schooling’ (2005,p12).

Aboriginal schools across Australia, in New Zealand, in the Indian nations of Canada and America, have identified several key elements that make a school successful in their communities. Fundamental reforms in these schools have made them work for the students, parents and teachers. These include Aboriginal people at the forefront of decision-making, and their world at the centre of curriculum making. Many of these schools share a similar narrative in their journey of creating appropriate learning environments for Aboriginal students.

Two such schools support these key elements. At Papunya school 260 km west of Alice Springs innovative reform led by the community and the principal offers schooling 'that is relevant to the student lives...and whose world embraced traditional, contemporary and Western forms of knowledge: all respected and promoted within the school, where two-way learning takes place in both Luritja and English’ (Finanne,2000)
Similarly in the Peach Springs School District in Arizona, USA, on the Hualapai Reservation, learning is holistic that includes mental, physical and affective process within the school. The curriculum model integrates Hualapi culture into themes based on topics relevant to the Indian culture; where children proceed at their own rate, learning through observation, demonstration and from the natural environment. Over a fifteen year period improvements have been attributed to increased student motivation and greater interest in curriculum that reflects their language and culture. The same key elements have made the program successful. These include support by the school board and administration, a program that meets ‘the academic and educational goals of the community; long term support by parents, community members and tribal government, commitment to staff development and training, relevant policy, inclusion of culturally and linguistically relevant materials. Overall greater educational improvement and attendance of students’ (Peach Springs School District# Information Kit, 1991, p20).

At the Rock Point Community School in Navajo Nation Northwest Arizomza a leading Aboriginal researcher in education Reyhner (1993) noted that for community schools to be successful the following elements are needed. These key elements underpin the foundations of a successful school for Aboriginal children, that is: education through community control, and a community elected Board control over curriculum.

Successful schools according to Reyhner (1993) empower Indian students through curriculum, culture and language. These are the conditions students require to be successful in their school work. He draws on a review undertaken by an educational researcher Cummins(1981) who found that the ‘incorporation of the cultural and linguistic background of the student in the school curriculum; the participation of the community in school activities; the use of interactive teaching methods which emphasised the role of the student; parental involvement; an elected school committee; community events, and
reinforcing community cohesiveness were the foundations upon which aboriginal children achieved success in schooling’ (1993,p97)

As well, in Aboriginal schools of America and Canada, curriculum is the key element for cultural appropriateness and relevance to the students. As noted by Gililand (1987) successful school curriculum requires the involvement of community in content and cultural knowledge, the integration of language and includes a culture team planning, community support in writing, sharing and improving materials, a committee of Aboriginal people to review materials, cultural expertise, ownership of information and training for staff.

Within the context of the education system is the eurocentric foundations of knowing that have dominated education in what Battiste (2002) refers to as “cognitive imperialism”. This offers a foundation to what Indigenous knowledge and knowing is, what processes for learning are critical to its continued use and how it has been brought into a learning environment such as Woolum Bellum School.

Many Maori education researchers state that it is the mono-cultural domination of education which has denied our children the ability to understand their sense of belonging. It is through learning in an appropriate cultural context this occurs in Aboriginal education.

The elements of success as discussed in other stories confirms that Woolum Bellum was on the right journey to becoming autonomous in a hostile environment of a dominant mono-cultural education system.

Introducing Aboriginal culture into the education system has been seen as a solution to the issues of underachievement of Aboriginal students in the western education system. This is a fundamental flaw due to a system which serves a mono-cultural western society Bishop & Glynn (1999). Furthermore, they suggest there have been no significant moves in addressing cultural
diversity in education as policies and practices continue to be developed within a framework of colonialism. This framework is founded in the context of what Scheunch & Young (1997) refer to as ‘epistemological racism’, racism that is ‘embedded in the fundamental principles of the dominant culture’ (1999,p10).

It is within this context that the policies and practices of the Aboriginal Protection Board and various policies thereafter had a single intent: the assimilation of Aboriginal children through western education practices. Successive relationships based on patterns of oppression and marginalisation continue to perpetuate underachievement of Aboriginal children while the development of relevant pedagogies within a context of cultural diversity fails to recognise that a mono-cultural education does not have the answers. And a serious reluctance to recognise that Aboriginal culture is part of the solution.

Within the Australian education system successive policies with foundations in assimilation, integration, multiculturalism, and biculturalism were concerned with the welfare of Aboriginal people. These policies have been an effective tool in the subjugation of Aboriginal people and their identity. Dominance of a mono-cultural society across politics, economics, social policy, and education has been used to meet the goals and needs of a western society.

These policies denied the existence of a pre-existing and complex Indigenous education system. Aboriginal culture was considered the obstacle to achieving the aims of assimilation and integration where Aboriginal children would abandon their culture to learn new ways and be able to participate in the dominant culture.

Smith and Bishop (1999) extend this view not only in terms of Maori but when applied to relationships with other cultural groups.
The Emergence of the KODE (Koorie Open Door Education) Schools

To understand the development of the KODE concept and how the idea emerged as a possibility I looked to my key informants. I was not surprised to find out that it was a matter of timing. I had worked in policy sections of Education departments and knew that a good idea sometimes grew legs.

The timing of the KODE concept can be viewed as opportunistic. At the time the political environment surrounding the closure of Northlands Secondary College in Northcote, Victoria was tense. The proposed closure created a situation of how the needs of displaced Koorie children could be addressed. I was involved in these discussions at VAEAI (Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated) and in the Department of Education. All of us involved in the discussions seized the opportunity to try something relatively new, hence the development of a KODE concept. This new concept was based on data evidence demonstrating the failure of the system to improve retention and educational outcomes for Koorie children.

Since its inception in 1976, the VAEAI role is to address lack of participation, non-attendance, and non achievement of Aboriginal students in relation to other students. Major education reports showed a real need to address these issues.

Since 1990 VAEAI has taken on a new and important role on behalf of the Koorie community in education. At the same time, under the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) the Victorian Koorie community through VAEAI, and the Ministry of Education now the Commonwealth Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) formalised a new partnership. In Victoria, this is referred to as the Partnership in Education: Koorie Education Policy which addresses the 21 goals of the NAEP. The formal agreement is the Yalca strategy and is signed off between VAEAI and the
Victorian Education Department. The framework of Yalca is premised on placing the Koorie student at the centre of educational decision making.

These two issues underpinned the formalised partnership in education agreement between the VAEAI and the DEETYA. The scene was set for the bricks and mortar development of the KODE. The Koorie Open Door Education (KODE) became a joint partnership between the Koorie Community of Victoria and the Victorian Department of Education aiming to consolidate the best of knowledge from the Koorie view and the western world view.

In 1994, three years after the formalised agreement between VAEAI, the Education Department and the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECG’s) Indigenous communities were invited to submit an expression of interest for the opportunity to have the KODE concept of schooling initiated and developed within a community.

My Role in the Early Days of Woolum Bellum

I have been involved with the KODE School from the outset. In 1994, I was the Chairperson of the Traralgon LAECG and involved in activities around schooling, such as the homework centre where school aged Koorie children could attend after school hours to receive additional assistance and general participation in school activities. My two youngest children attended the local primary school, as well as the homework centre. My interest in the education, my position as a lecturer at University, and my firmly held belief that the education system could do better inspired me to play a role in Woolum Bellum’s developments.

In my experience and opinion, new initiatives and new programs in Aboriginal education (had, up until this time) offered more of the band-aid approach to maintaining the status quo. The opportunity to return to work in my own community and to take up teaching our own people drew me away from the departmental and policy driven environment of the positions I held in
education previously. My own education background was enhanced and
developed from my strong connection to cultural values and my parental
guidance in the Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. This was a snapshot of
my own background which contributed to my own self empowerment over
many years.

When the opportunity to establish a school based on a Koorie sense of
ownership, leadership in decision making, an environment which valued Koorie
knowledge and respected community and embraced Koorie values of family in
the processes I was excited at the opportunity to provide leadership and
experience to the school. My involvement was initially as the Chairperson of an
LAECG but my enthusiasm and involvement grew from the knowledge that this
was an opportunity to build a schooling experience for the benefit of our
children. At Woolum Bellum they could learn both ways, and be supported to
achieve their aspirations to go forward by having choices.

At the time, I was teaching at TAFE and studying part-time so my involvement
was in a supportive and community building capacity. I was a fill-in teacher: I
supported the development and teaching of Gunnai language. I gladly
volunteered for the Interim Committee of Management (COM); this was the
decision-making path needed to influence the direction of the school. The
leadership in the school looked to the COM for guidance and advice in the
development and management of the school. The COM established key
distinctive decision-making processes, which included the employment of staff,
the decision about curriculum, the incorporating of Koorie values into the
school environment, and the school charter to support a pathway for
development.

Initially my role as Chairperson evolved from the reluctance of parent carers to
participate in this leadership role and the need to have consistent approaches
to decision making. Leadership through management in the school strongly
supported the decision making processes to direct and guide the development
of the school. Over the past six years this changed reluctance within the school management to embrace the role of COM in decision-making processes.

At times it was obvious that despite being part of a progressive education process to work collaboratively with the COM had a major impact on decision making. This created serious cracks to the foundations and resulted in a distrust of the relationship in the community.

**My Official Role: Chairperson of Woolum Bellum Committee of Management**

The Woolum Bellum Committee of Management was established in the first six months of the commencement of the school and continued the work of the interim committee.

Originally I didn’t hold the position of Chairperson of Woolum Bellum Committee of Management. I was the Traralgon LAECG Chairperson with a position on the Committee of Management. I remained on the committee in that capacity until my family relocated to Churchill and I relinquished my position. The composition of the COM included community members and this enabled me to remain.

The position of Chairperson of the COM became an issue as successive parents declined the role, leaving the structure and decision making processes in jeopardy. The LAECG Chairperson took over the role and again the position for various reasons was not stable. I agreed to take on the position of Chairperson of the COM to provide stability for the decision making process and to support the COM role for the school. This was despite the COM rules of appointment to the committee, where a parent should be the Chairperson.

For the next two years, I worked on several working parties to establish a school which focused on an appropriate curriculum, to ensure the decision
making processes and leadership was based on the KODE concept. It was a challenging task that many in our community found difficult, however we worked collaboratively together and supported the end products to realise the KODE school concept.

I assisted the staff to establish a culturally relevant curriculum within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards framework (VELS). I undertook a community consultative process on behalf of the school to seek permission and support for a draft model curriculum based on the knowledge of the Bataluk Trail. In 1991, the Aboriginal communities from Morwell through to Cann River had developed a venture based on establishing a tourism trail known as the Bataluk Trail. It included places and sites of significance and knowledge about each place in each community. This became The Bataluk Curriculum which then went into a planning process inclusive of staff and community to embed it in the school. The content and structure of delivery was assisted and supported by community members including myself. The elements of the Bataluk Curriculum formed the foundations to meet the educational, social, and cultural needs of the students.

This was challenging but significant work as the staff and students worked together to understand the framework, content and knowledge of the Bataluk curriculum. Listening played a major part in this journey as the school moved into knowledge of culture, using technology, literature and all the foundation skills in education. However, as the vehicle for learning, the Bataluk Curriculum was firmly embedded in the school.

The Committee of Management actively engaged in the decision making processes of the school by working together. These processes culminated in a model which positively enhanced the school. The community felt empowered by these processes, their knowledge was welcomed and acknowledged. In all the indicators as required by the Department of Education the school was demonstrating success.
Working closely with the school management ensured the processes of decision-making were agreeable and effective within the school. When the school management changed my role became less defined and more difficult. The change of management impacted on staff, community and the consultative processes that had been in place. The newly appointed Principal decided on a different course of decision making which did not value previously established methods and protocols, thereby adopting a non-consultative approach. There was a failure to work collaboratively within the KODE management concept of decision making processes that excluded rather than were inclusive of the community. My role was diminished in this respect. My ability to affect and influence decisions and to provide appropriate cultural advice on processes was generally not valued or understood. A non-inclusive style of leadership in the School eroded the ability of staff and community to effectively have a real role in the School.

Initially the school remained on track but within a very short period of time the cracks started to appear. Many processes previously established became an ongoing battle to sustain within the school management. As the Chairperson my role was consumed by constantly trying to keep the school accountable to the community and faithful to the concept of the KODE. As a result of the constant turmoil which translated into rumors and distrust, the community eventually turned their backs by talking with their feet. This is how the community behaves when they distrust organisations and people they no longer support. At the time it was a difficult task to encourage staff and community to continue their support of the children at the school.

Together with several other committed community members, we decided the school was important and had a place in the community. We agreed to work together to battle the challenges and turmoil to pursue the established processes for making decisions and to firmly assert the role of the COM. My resolve to stay with the school over this period was both personal and defiant
as I too could have talked with my feet and walked. I could have made the
decision, like so many others to walk away, but my determination to keep
working to define the position of the school in the community was always going
to be greater than the issues of individuals.

My personal experience of growing up in two worlds has given me the strength
to know that we can make a difference in the lives of the children attending
Woolum Bellum. The school does have the power, the support and the
knowledge to make a difference. It also will and can inform how this is possible
through advice and collaboration. The building of a learning environment that
will meet the social, educational and identity needs of Koorie children will
allow their participation in community. Most importantly, this will happen in
ways which they choose for themselves.

Community doubts about the capacity of the school focused on several issues:
bullying; mostly with management of the older children, and the ability of the
school to offer a broad range of education. There was an assumption that the
school was for the ‘bad’ kids. Parents did not want their younger children in
that learning environment. Also in the community there was a perception that
the school was of a lower standard, and that the curriculum was not the same
as other schools. These issues created distrust by the community of the KODE
model. Some parents withdrew their children and sent them back to the
mainstream; some parents moved their children back and forwards between
schools, some parents chose to send their children to the school as an
alternative. These perceptions of the school’s ability to provide an educational
program for their children perpetuated the rumours and concerns about the
school within the community.

The nature of the issues in the management of the school has been serious. The
management of the various issues has been handled in different ways, within
the host college and within the region always though with different individuals.
Since the Federation Bureau was established as the central management of the
Victorian College of Koorie Education P-12 (VCOKE) its ability to manage and address some issues was welcomed.

The power to be autonomous is not a change the community can make, but it could offer the willingness and support to provide a workable and changed structure in policies, management, leadership and knowledge to move into an environment which is sustainable for the long term.

**Lessons from the Issues**

The intensity and pace in which the KODE concept emerged has, I suggest, contributed to the issues. I believe full speculation of possibilities in the structures may have anticipated the issues, and may have, at the time, been resolved by clearly defining roles and responsibility. Action came only from seeking senior advice from positions of leadership and responsibility in the system. If the possibility of the issues had been anticipated and intervention strategies instigated the decline in confidence by community and staff may have been avoided.

In anticipating the issues in the concept of a schooling environment, such as KODE, there have been clear lessons to be learnt. If the lessons from the issues are listened to then schools like KODE can be a viable alternative for success for Aboriginal children in the education system. The issues at the centre of the school clearly identify key enablers for success. These include establishing effective management structures, a well planned leadership process, engagement of students, real respect for community and the processes which incorporate these elements. Most importantly, it translates into a model which both satisfies and respects the Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing for the health and wellbeing of our future generations.
In this chapter, I discussed my early experiences of schooling and in particular the knowledge and curriculum content. I share my own story as an Aboriginal person honouring the knowledge and stories passed on through family and my experience of living in ‘two worlds’. I have reflected on using a research paradigm congruent with my ways of knowing, my methodology of inquiry, my experience as an educator, my research questions, rationale, the development of the school and my role in the establishment of the school.

The next chapter focuses on the honouring of my ways of knowing and using a research paradigm that incorporates a methodology for inquiry that recognises indigenous ontology and epistemology. I use the narrative medium of quilts to articulate this method of inquiry.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Ngarju wulgunggo (my journey) in research

Incorporating a methodology that links an indigenous ontology and epistemology which has a framework that connects to my ways of knowing has been a challenge of this study.

I have looked to Indigenous researchers to find a method which gives voice for the story that starts from an indigenous paradigm. A narrative inquiry method created a link between method and paradigm. It is through a narrative inquiry process that Clandinin (2006) says we 'meet ourselves' and where we can work within the space to learn from the phenomena, it allows for thinking narratively, in narrative ways of inquiring. In this study narrative inquiry and my narrative ways of inquiring links both a method and the phenomena of study, and is the reconstruction of a persons experience in relationship both to the other. Clandinin & Connelly, (2000)

Narrative inquiry as a method is, as Beattie (2007) emphasizes unique to the person where, theory and practice are integrated within an individual’s narrative of experience. This narrative process is she states is ‘a way of thinking and a fundamental way that individuals structure their experience and make sense of their world’ (pg. 174). This method of inquiry in this study has allowed for learning from a phenomenon, or a particular problem which could not be achieved through other theories and methods.

The processes of narrative inquiry used in this study contribute to how this as a method can inform other ways of knowing the world. Learning by inquiry and the investigation of personal experience has as Hooley suggests (2009) a long history in progressive education practice throughout the past. He suggests that participatory narrative inquiry can link Indigenous and non-Indigenous
educators to share knowledge and practice in education for Aboriginal children. This learning can make changes to education that is inclusive and ‘allows a model and framework to be reflective’ (pg.15). Furthermore, he suggests that by ‘developing participatory narrative inquiry for schools demands that teachers and community interpret schooling as a means of respecting, generating and transforming culture and knowledge, not merely reproducing the values and practices of conservative world view.’(p.17)’

In this study in a particular paradigm a narrative inquiry method using interpretive processes assists in recognising that there are multiple ways of knowing and studying the world and the interactions of people. Embracing this interactive quality enables understanding of the ways in which what we know is embedded in a particular context.(Pinnegar and Daynes 2007 p.7).

Starting from an Indigenous Paradigm and Incorporating Indigenous Perspectives

In this chapter my focus will be on how I am using an Indigenous research paradigm in my inquiries, and how using Dadirri as a methodology honors Indigenous knowledge. I intend that you as the reader learn about my personal story to gain an understanding of my ways of knowing as an Aboriginal person and how ‘listening properly’ informs my principles of research. The creation of space is discussed in relation to other ways of knowing and relating to the world.

This chapter uses the voice of being an Aboriginal person referring to the epistemology and ontology of being an Aboriginal person and the principles of research which inform the study. The images of the quilts are presented as the sites for telling the story of the Woolum Bellum School.
To write about my ways of knowing does not come as easily as telling the story in the ways of our old people. This has been built using an Indigenous research paradigm to underpin the nature of the inquiry and research methods.

In telling the story of the school, the quilts give voice to the old people in sharing another way of knowing. This, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005, p. 87) writes ‘informs contemporary practices’. These practices of decision making in the school, of relationship building with community and of listening, were the ‘spaces’ in the education system processes which would give the voices a chance to be heard.

In discussing the concept of space, Tuhiwai Smith (2005) focuses on the spaces in between. These spaces, which she suggests, are a ‘challenge to research, its paradigms practices and impacts’ - play a significant role in making those spaces richly nuanced in terms of the diverse interests that occupy such spaces and are at the same time much more dangerous for the unsuspecting qualitative traveler. It therefore highlights the other ways of knowing and relating to the world. It shows that Indigenous communities have ancient memories of another way of knowing that informs contemporary practices, and when the foundations of those memories are disturbed, space sometimes is created for alternative imaginings to be voiced, to be sung, and to be heard again (Smith 2005, p.87). Rigney (1999, p.124) writes that ‘we can shift the construction of knowledge to one which does not compromise Indigenous identity and Indigenous principles freed from racism, independence and unity.

How, in the Woolum Bellum School, did we create a learning environment built upon Indigenous ways of knowing? How has our reality of being Aboriginal, and the ways in which that reality is understood, been built? I suggest this was only possible through the knowledge of family and how that is translated for the children. I argue this was only possible because of the knowledge of the Bataluk curriculum, because it is steeped in knowledge about country; in the ways of the people and knowledge that comes with understanding and knowing.
How do the children know the ways of their ancestors, how do they learn or relearn such knowledge? Assimilation has failed them: they are in no-man's land. Hence the knowledge of other ways of knowing being built into the school environment is done without losing the identity of Aboriginality.

In this study, through talking circles, the story is built on collective memories of those sharing the journey of the school. The quilts create a connectedness of the story and the contributors, and give voice to the sense of knowing. In this way Bishop (1996) acknowledges that the collective memories empowers the indigenous narrative voice and promotes ‘alternative research designs in giving ownership to a culturally appropriate ontology’ (p 520). Furthermore he simply states that telling stories as subjective voices is not adequate because it ignores the impact that the stories of the other research participants have on our stories. In this way the quilts give a shared connectedness in the story. Instead we need to acknowledge our participatory connectedness with the other research participants and promote a sense of knowing in a way which denies distance and separation and promotes commitment and engagement. (Bishop 1996, p 23-24).

**Listening to Indigenous Paradigms**

Like many other Indigenous researchers, in this study I have wanted to start with an Indigenous viewpoint. I have wanted to tell this story using the voice, epistemology and ontology of my being as an Aboriginal person. I have sought the voices of other Indigenous researchers to help me build my knowledge and understanding.

In building my knowledge and understanding, epistemology and ontology are central to starting from an Indigenous viewpoint. This is the underlying view of Indigenous researcher Lester Rigney (1997) who expresses the views of many Indigenous scholars. He writes that ‘indigenous people think and interpret the
world and its realities in differing ways to non indigenous peoples because of their experiences, histories and culture’ (Rigney 1997, p.8).

Shawn Wilson, a Cree man in his study *Research as Ceremony: Articulating an Indigenous Research Paradigm* (2004) used a qualitative research approach informed by the principles of Dadirri shared by Atkinson (2001), of respect and of checking your heart. Wilson (2004) drew on the concept of relational accountability which required him to form reciprocal and respectful relationships in the community where he was conducting research.

Using a qualitative research approach, he used a strategy of inquiry which included participant observation. This methodology respects the Indigenous way of learning by developing interviews with individual participants, focus group discussions and seminar style conversations (using traditional talking circles) based on the ideal of respect where everyone has an equal chance to speak and be heard. I was particularly drawn to his approach to data gathering as it is congruent with my way of knowing and followed proper community protocols for working with the community.

To start from an Indigenous viewpoint Wilson (2004) argues that to use a particular paradigm, where some Indigenous scholars have attempted to decolonise methodologies and to attempt to insert them into a mainstream paradigm will not be effective because it is difficult to remove the epistemology and ontology upon which they are built. He suggests starting from an Indigenous paradigm, then using any tool from within that paradigm which can be effective to help build knowledge and understanding.

Like Wilson (2004) honouring an Indigenous viewpoint in my study has given me clear direction to shaping my own approach. In this way, the principles of Dadirri as shared by Atkinson (2001), of respect, of ‘checking your heart’, of reality, of ways of being, of integrity and of the responsibility of the Indigenous researcher to honour their own ontologies and epistemology, are adhered to.
This view is shared by Weber-Pillwax (2003) and Martin (2003) who believe in the significance of Indigenous ways of knowing, of being and of doing, to guide the shape of Indigenous research. As Rigney (2007) and Atkinson (2001) suggest, the ontological underpinning of my own approach is that the ‘reality’ of the Indigenous experience differs from that of those in other communities (Atkinson 2001).

Telling the story of the school using the quilts gives voice to the old people and shares another way of knowing. This other way of knowing, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) writes, informs contemporary practices. These practices of decision making in the school, of relationship building with community and listening were the ‘spaces’ in the education system processes which would give the voices a chance to be heard.

**Quilt-making as a Site for Story-telling**

Using quilts to tell the story of the Woolum Bellum School has enabled me to be true to my ways of knowing. It has provided me with the opportunity to tell the stories in a way that can be shared with the community. It is important to me as an Indigenous researcher to share stories in ways which are culturally appropriate and useful for learning. The quilts I have made as part of my study are a visual representation of a story sewn with knowledge.

In my research I have told stories of the Woolum Bellum School on three quilts.

It has been important to present the information of this study in a culturally appropriate way for telling the story of Woolum Bellum. In my experience and in the ways of our old people, stories are told so that it is relational and connected for the listener to gain knowledge and to give an understanding of their connection to the story. This gives the listener the basis from which they can apply actions or the appropriate way to behave or learn. This enables the listener to take in what they can understand to do in relation to their
knowledge. This knowledge, however, must (for those who are not able to interpret the story) still enable them to understand that there are other ways. This is why the quilts present an appropriate medium for storytelling.

*Storytelling on Quilts: Other Indigenous Voices*

During this study and in my search for other voices that tell their stories on quilts; I found that the women of Peru also tell stories through quilting. These quilts known as *Arpilleras*, are vividly illustrated and tell the stories of the lives of the women. They originate in Chile, where women as political prisoners were held during the Pinochet régime. They were used to smuggle out notes to the outside. They told the stories of everyday lives of the women, in their villages, of their treatment in the jails.

As well, the Hmong women of Vietnam stitched intricately designed quilts to tell their story of persecution by the Chinese rulers wanting to extinguish the Hmong language. To preserve their language, the women made story cloths or quilts known as *Pandau*. It was their only chosen medium used to retain their knowledge and cultural identity. When they eventually lost their written language, the *Pandau* became the written form of documentation. Other quilts show their everyday stories of living, of ceremonies, and of their new life in America.

In America since their colonial period, Carolyn Mazloomi (2008) writes that for African-American women quilts have been the vehicle of political and social activism. They are a narrative medium to tell their personal history and stories. The anti slavery quilts and freedom quilts from the nineteenth century continue to tell the stories of civil rights and political injustice.

So too, the women of the Philippines known as the ‘comfort women’ tell their stories of suffering using quilts as a narrative medium. Their quilts depicted
their lives during World War II when, as young women they were caught, abused and raped by the Japanese soldiers.

The Elements of my Research Enquiry: my Principles of Research

Whilst my research journey has been informed by my ways of knowing these have mapped a clear pathway for the development of who I am as an Indigenous person who is researching the question of this inquiry. I have already explored my need to follow an Indigenous research paradigm based on the knowledge and understanding and being informed by other Indigenous researchers. Being able to articulate the journey in this study on this framework has led me to be come more comfortably in the decisions I need to make and how these decisions are informed and built upon.

When I began the study, I knew that I would have to find a way to try and make someone understand where I was going and where I was coming from and, for me, this study has provided that space.

I have identified five research principles which are central to who I am. They are not separate to my ways of knowing and being. They are the ways of my parents, grandparents and ancestors. They have provided guidance to all of our lives.

My Principles of Research

Through the course of my study, five principles have emerged as important for me as an Indigenous researcher. They are:
1. Cultural ways of knowing
2. Reciprocal and respectful relationships
3. Talking circles as a place where everyone has a chance to speak
Cultural Ways of Knowing

Cultural ways of knowing are deeply embedded in my psyche. They lie at the core of the way I think, the way I look at the world and the way I live my life. These ways are the essence of how I do things. They are the unquestioned processes and ways of looking at the world which underpins my world of being in Aboriginal. These ways have taught me how to think, how to process information both visually and through listening. I have learnt these things which grow stronger as I grow old, our Elders are our guides along our journey. I apply this knowledge to the world I live in and relate to.

My cultural ways of knowing have taught me how to listen deeply. My maternal grandmother used to tell us to ‘listen properly’. She meant for us to not just hear what she was saying but to listen deeply and respectfully and to learn from what she said.

Cultural knowledge goes beyond the human and includes animals as well as the physical and spiritual worlds. It includes the sun, the moon, the mountains, the rivers and the sea. As I grow old these things grow stronger. I apply this knowledge to the world I live in and relate to it every day. I am sometimes torn between the two ways but I have learned to walk in two worlds and still remain true to myself.

In the development of my quilts I have wanted to share knowledge through culturally congruent ways of knowing. The quilts are the creative expression of knowledge and can be understood in different ways.
2. Reciprocal and Respectful Relationships
I acknowledge the guidance of our Ancestors and our old people who teach us how to live together, how to live with the land and to respect the physical and spiritual worlds we share. These ways have been passed on in stories through the generations. Our relationships with our children, our Elders and our community reflect our understanding of having respectful and reciprocal relationships with each other.

Russell Bishop (2005, p.114) discusses this relationship in ‘Kaupapa Maori’ which means ‘being and acting Maori.’ This prescribed way of being Maori is determined. So, too, my prescribed ways are determined from my own cultural ways of knowing in being Aboriginal. This foundation underpinned how I approached this research within the community: how I shared knowledge; how I approached with questions; how I behaved toward Elders and community, men and women; what my responsibility to those I interviewed required of me; and how I conducted myself including the techniques and tools of my role.

Bishop (2005) suggests that it is through the ‘Kaupapa Maori’ approach to research that the researcher is in a participatory mode of consciousness in which they become part of the process. In my own experience, understanding the process of reciprocal and respectful relationships underpins my work as an Indigenous researcher. My approach to working with research participants, gathering data and representing my findings is predicated on having healthy relationships. To be congruent with my ways of knowing, I need to be connected and engaged with the people participating in my research.

Reciprocal relationships provide a foundation to knowledge and give guidance to what is appropriate for people to live in the world.

3. Talking Circles

Talking Circles are the ways of our old people. They are a place where everyone can speak. Whilst they can be confronting for some, they provide
equality. Respect and valuing the rights of others is a principle upon which Talking Circles operate. In Talking Circles, language is spoken and unspoken. Deeply listening to each other encourages full discussion to flow. The core characteristics of Talking Circles are to show respect to each other and to avoid power struggles and domination of the discussion. Listening is done respectfully and properly, with everyone engaging in learning and discussion. Decision making is carried out in a consensual manner. This is the way we like to do business.

The talking circles have been shown to us as a way of doing business. They have meaning in the way we understand respect, patience, and thinking through issues. They have taught us the basis of communication. In the family, we understand this process of decision-making. We were given the opportunity to have input to many of the major decisions that impacted on the family.

When a management model for the KODE concept of schooling was proposed, there was some hesitation from the beginning. Both Indigenous and non-indigenous staff, management and advisors were open to new ways of working with the community but unsure of a collaborative process. We used the proposed model to establish processes for empowering decision-making in implementation of policies, curriculum and staffing. Talking circles to led the way. The community felt empowered to lead the way in this model of KODE schooling. This process proved to be a critical element in the planning and decision making processes of the school.

In this study, data gathering is underpinned by the values of a Talking Circle and is embedded in the process of being in relationship with our Elders and the community.
Narratives are imbued with multiple meanings. Listening to the different voices within narratives is a culturally appropriate ontology for Indigenous people. Benham (2005) refers to Bakhtin (1986) who speaks of the power of the narrative to open up a space for voice where power, authority and representation can be heard, and in particular the voices of the most vulnerable, those most often not heard. Benham says that fundamentally different from Western academic knowledge, most Indigenous ways of knowing define power to bring about change: ‘not as individual power but as a sacred power passed on through story and ceremony. Indigenous narrative is not solely personal but is deeply communal’ (2005, p.519).

The stories in conversation are the tools for teaching and learning and are reinforced and passed on through the generations. Shared stories pass on knowledge that is learned through informal settings. These stories are embedded with wisdom that shapes the lives of Aboriginal people. This way of sharing stories provides the framework where a sense of ourselves is established in our relationships with others.

In my family, we have a tradition that has been sustained for many generations. Each year, the great-grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren camp at Mystery Bay in NSW. It is a place of renewal of the spirit and restoration of the body for the year ahead. It is a place and space in our busy lives for all of us to practice storytelling, to share knowledge and to teach our ways of knowing to our future generations. This year four generations shared this time together.

At Mystery Bay my mother sleeps in a caravan and her great-granddaughter, like me, has learned from her mother about the dooligah (a little hairy man). She likes the little caravan that her great-grandmother sleeps in. On one of her many visits to the caravan, she told her great-grandmother that she had better
close the curtains because the *dooligah* could see in and might come and get her. While she was there she learned that the *dooligah* lives in the mountain behind where we camp. She has learned through the stories the ways of our old people in discouraging children to wander off alone, just as her mother did and all those who have gone before us.

In my study, the stories in the quilts have multiple layers and allow the community to have a visual representation of the content of the study. Representing narratives of the school in the quilts provides an opportunity for the sharing of knowledge with community through conversation and discussions.

### 5. Community Protocols

Understanding community protocols is critical to getting things done. Knowledge of how the community will behave in certain circumstances and conditions is central to having respect for knowing the right way to behave and to respond. It also helps in understanding why the community may behave in a particular way. For example, ‘talking with their feet’, or saying ‘yes’ to avoid being pressured into agreeing to do something or not wanting to be hurried into making a decision. It is important to respect people for their knowledge, to understand community responses and to follow proper consultation processes.

My involvement and commitment to the Woolum Bellum School is well known across the community and the time and effort I give is acknowledged. In my research, this has assisted me in engaging the community to talk about the school. The community knows who I am and where I am coming from. They know that I am knowledgeable in community ways and the protocols understood. Building respectful relationships, establishing trust and respect are key elements to engaging in the community.
Deep listening, being part of the community and learning ways of relating to the community helps to get things done. We look at everything in an inter-related and inter-connected way. We don’t see things in isolation, which is sometimes why it takes us a long time to make decisions and why we sit and think sometimes, rather than speak.

Dadirri as a methodology underpins and defines creation of space. More importantly, for the spaces in between. The foundation of co-creating spaces in between is built on the principles of deep listening. Applying these principles as a research methodology provides an approach of relational respect. It describes a way of listening which builds trust and a way of acknowledging the spaces in between.

Translation of making the spaces in between meaningful and understood as a methodology, is understood when an Indigenous paradigm is based on an Indigenous knowledge system. How this is interpreted as a way of thinking and an understanding of the practice and process inherent in this way of thinking can and does become misunderstood.

I am suggesting that while the dominant ways of thinking are wanting to learn and interpret Dadirri, as a methodology it holds real meaning in an understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing. Dadirri transitions the ways of knowing that we as Aboriginal people have as an inherent way of knowing. It is a conduit for understanding our ways of knowing and listening properly, as my grandmother taught us.

Dadirri offers a way to think about what it means to listen properly. It helps us understand what it means when my maternal grandmother says it and the knowledge that underpins this, as well as the relational meaning of listening properly, how it translates in behaviour, what have I learnt from this knowledge and how this informs my behaviour and thinking.
This chapter shares the story of the school on the quilt, particularly the enablers of success. This gives the reader an understanding of the method of enquiry using my principles of research through storytelling using quilts and my cultural ways of knowing as expressed in several panels. It provides an insight to the nature of the interdependent ways Aboriginal people exist. The interconnection between each quilt relays the disruption invasion had on this way of life and the knowledge system therein, as well as the impacts on people’s lives from dispersal and forced movement brought about by the attitudes and policies of assimilation.
I introduce this story with quilts as a narrative medium. Each quilt, each panel, is part of the narrative as they are imbued with meaning and with many layers of knowledge. I have shared how these images have knowledge embedded from my ways of knowing and can speak to those who understand this knowledge. I am providing an opportunity to share this knowledge with community and to generate dialogue and discussion so that the voices will be heard.

I will describe how the quilts give meaning to the story as a narrative medium and show how they honour my Elders, Ancestors and family.

I am identifying the issues seen as disablers to the success of the Woolum Bellum School. I provide an introductory history of the establishment of the school in this story. Most importantly, I reflect on my learnings in traditional Aboriginal life, and the impacts of settlement on this practice. Finally, I very briefly outline the impacts of the history of the generations now attending the school.

This chapter has shared the narrative in the panels and provided a context for history of the community in the establishment of the school. It is the starting point to why the story of the school is important in relation to decisions in creating learning environments that meet the needs of Aboriginal children.

In the next chapter, I focus exclusively on the quilts as the medium for this narrative. In particular, I illustrate the making of quilts as a sharing knowledge medium for the community and how they have been used as a voice for sharing this story. I have made each quilt unique but yet interrelated and integrated as we are as Aboriginal people. They are relational to each other and in each contextualise my principles of research.
This chapter addresses what is behind the issues discussed and how these have impacted on the growth and morale in the school and community. I reflect on the beginning of this journey with the Woolum Bellum School and how school management lost sight of one of the key elements for success - real support from the community. I am sharing the ways of a traditional life and the organisation for functioning where education and learning was an everyday activity learnt for survival within the laws of responsibility. I am providing a historical context for understanding the relationship between the community and education particularly for the children attending the school.

The images on the quilts give visual meaning to the story and describe each quilt as representations of knowledge and how issues have been interpreted from my ways of knowing. They honour Indigenous knowledge and add meaning to the epistemology and ontology of being an Aboriginal person and the principles on which this research is based.

**Enablers that became Disablers to the Success of the School**

The concept and proposal for KODE schooling emerged from a belief that the mainstream education system could do better. In this existed a moral imperative to try. And that in the vision there was an ability and capability for KODE schools to mould a school learning environment that meets the educational aspirations of parents and of Aboriginal students.

Emerging from the concept processes for management, input from community and school direction were established at the outset to be incorporated and implemented. The school management and leadership was pivotal in the adoption of and respect for engaging with community differently. Key processes became issues for and future disablers.
**Decision Making Processes**

Talking circles created a foundation of trust and mutual respect which the community engaged in to ensure collaborative and consensual decisions to be made. This builds community and respects knowledge taught from our Elders across the development of leadership, curriculum, policy and community where input was based on creating trust and respect.

The KODE concept, determined through processes and committee establishment, the collaborative and consensual manner in which decisions would be made ensuring a Koorie majority. While the processes of the Woolum Bellum COM existed, often these were ignored and believed to be manipulated to determine an expedient outcome. The processes previously adopted to achieve real decision making was replaced with disrespect and total disregard.

**Policies Input and Underpinning Framework**

Changes to management had changed the original process of decisions on policies. The process previously established while taking longer gave the school a balanced approach to making decisions which were empowering in the process. The new management in not adopting this process has severely impacted on the confidence of community to have a real input. There was no proper input and consultative processes established to review, write and determine policies for the school. These were often written without an adequate consultation process.
Management and Leadership Integral Components

The contemporary image of distress focused mostly on this particular time in the school. As the story narrated on the quilt shows, strong feelings of loss for what had been created and built, was slipping away. The images of knowing in a cultural sense, of trouble happening as represented by a willy-willy with spiritual ancestors, gives an sense of urgency to step up to the challenges. These images send a message of the trying times experienced with the management and leadership of the school.

![Image of Distress](image)

Figure 4: Image of Distress

The non-appointment of Aboriginal staff in leadership roles has failed the community. The systems of management have not listened to community or shown respect for community. Serious issues created turmoil with staff, with claims of sexual harassment, claims of bullying, staff losses, and losing involvement and support from community. The loss of many students and staff has been a direct result of management. Undermining and direct intimidation has eroded the initial start the school and community adopted.
Curriculum Framework for Both Ways Learning

In the adoption and development of the school curriculum, my knowledge as an Aboriginal woman facilitated discussion with community to develop the model and framework for our children to learn both ways. These images of language, stories, places of significance, and history are the foundations to sharing important knowledge with children and community.

Figure 5: Images of Language, Stories, Places of Significance & History

Originally school management welcomed the opportunity to embrace making a learning environment which met the educational social and identity needs of the Aboriginal children. The adoption and development of the Bataluk
Curriculum provided a solid framework for any other Aboriginal school to use as a curriculum framework to be incorporated and developed.

The Bataluk Curriculum Model gave the school a sound curriculum framework. The recognition of this has been undermined both by the Education system and within the school. The Federation Bureau for the Victorian College of Koorie Education P-12 (VCOKE) of the four campuses engaged Dr Neil Hooley, from the School of Education at Victoria University, to develop a model curriculum for implementation across the campuses. He recognised that the Bataluk Curriculum offered a framework and model from which an Indigenous epistemology regarding knowledge, teaching and learning had been developed. The ownership of the knowledge and framework of the Bataluk Curriculum belonged to the community and not the system.

Built within the framework of this curriculum is the knowledge of the community, the Elders, and country to be shared and to give a sense of identity and belonging the Koorie students could relate to.

**A Brief History of Woolum Bellum**

At first the two LAECG’s (Morwell and district LAECG and the Traralgon LAECG) in the area independently submitted an expression of interest. The expression of interest involved the gathering of data with letters of interest and support from varied and diverse interests such as Monash University, the local ALP member Keith Hamilton, the Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE, and the other local agencies.

A key factor was to find an existing school to host the KODE School and to ensure support from their school council, the community, the parents and grandparents, to have the numbers to start, and their commitment to be involved in the school. Following the submission, the VAEAI came back to both the LAECG’s and engaged in discussions to encourage the communities of
central Gippsland to submit a joint submission which would benefit the whole
the region rather than a single community.

Following several meetings, the Master Principal of Kurnai College Jack Howe
became the key driver in securing the support of the Kurnai School Council, the
school community and others to host the KODE School.

Late November 1993 the community was advised of a successful bid. A
taskforce appointed by the Department of Education, became the
implementation team to work with the successful community to get the school
operational.

To this day the Committee of Management will always be indebted to Jack for
his insight, his drive, support and knowledge of the western ways of doing
things. We were confident in the knowledge to be able to sell it to our own
community and that it was a testing ground for the wider community.

Schools and others in the region saw the school as promoting segregation,
including many of the local Aboriginal community, but we pursued the goal
based on our belief that it could work and that we had both the drive and
expertise amongst us to make it happen in the interest of the long term. Other
LAECG’s from across the state had also submitted their proposal for the same
opportunity. A reference group of interested parties was established to discuss
the issues which were identified in the preparation of the joint submission with
the understanding that we were in with a chance and wanted to be prepared to
accept the challenge.

From my background, I believed that the only way we could get the western
education to be inclusive of and accepting of our ways of knowing and doing,
was to infiltrate the system. My initial expectation of ‘working from within’ is
to do it from inside existing schools and curriculum frameworks to
challenge/change the existing content and processes. We could use this
empowerment to make significant changes. The opportunity to start from scratch inspired me and others to respond to the call and to take up the challenge on behalf of the community.

The committee was on track to have the school up and operating in January 1994, with nothing already in place but many ideas of possible ways to get started on the issues such as transport. We really had no idea and I remember writing a statement for the proposal that identified the need to address the issues of retention, attendance, curriculum and environment - all of which sat well with the VAEAI’s birth to death concept and the development of a learning environment to meet the needs of Koorie students.

There were no buildings, no staff, just an opportunity to establish a school in which to provide a both ways educational opportunity for the children in our community. The structure of the concept was based on the VAEAI philosophies in their policy agreements. These included processes for decision making and making the student central to the educational process.

My father always talked about the ‘dream’ to have a school in which we could provide the Koorie children with an educational environment that valued their Aboriginality, that celebrated their heritage; that gave them an opportunity to learn about their identity, and a learning environment that didn’t continue to fail them.

The implementation team worked alongside the LAECG’s, extra helpers, Jack Howe and the regional office to start from scratch. The priority to open the school was the appointment of a Principal to put into place staff, to organise the school processes, to establish classes, to start the task of getting the school off the ground.

The appointment of a Principal created a challenge for the education system. The host school, Kurnai College Master Principal, Jack Howe, fully endorsed the
need for the community to have ownership of this process and he assisted with his expertise and knowledge to look for the right person. Jack did some head hunting for the advertised position. The applicants for the position also underwent a new process in Principal selection. They were asked to meet the community. This was congruent with Koorie ways of knowing. Relationship building is seen as more important to the community, than power and authority. Jack was looking for the right person who would understand and accept the Koorie ways and to also have the leadership skills to progress the school and consolidate its beginnings. The applicants were interviewed by a panel which included community members. This was the first step in real community decision making in the school. The successful applicant showed the community she also had the skills and expertise to take on the task.

Portable buildings arrived at the school site and were erected to give some semblance of a school environment. Furniture and other necessary school items arrived soon after, the regional office provided full support, and the staff was appointed for the start of the 1995 school year. The staff of the school was recruited in a similar manner to the Principal. Talented teachers and support staff both Indigenous and non-Indigenous were engaged. The Principal and staff began the task of getting ready for the first intake of students.

The school did experience some disruption in the early stages which led to re-locating some staff. The school appointed a Koorie Liaison person to build community relationships and to work with parents and students.

The interim Committee of Management focused on establishing the areas which would cement the philosophy of the school. Our first priority was to work with the Principal on the school charter because we believed this would provide the direction and structure for ongoing development of the school. The Interim Committee of Management quickly established the values of the Koorie community in ensuring the KODE concept of access, open door to community and families was in an environment which demonstrated the commitment to
community to which they supported. The community believed their kids would have an educational opportunity not available to them in the mainstream schools.

One of the opportunities was to embrace the chance to embed Koorie values of kinship, respect for Elders, family relationships, older children responsibilities for younger family members, respect for land, and significant places in the cultural teachings. Under Languages Other Than English (LOTE) we immediately sought to put into the curriculum the Gunnai language and to have the most experienced Aboriginal language teacher in our community teach Gunnai language from Grade Prep to Year 12. The first charter endorsed by the Committee of Management for KODE focused on culture, literacy and technology.

This would provide the foundations for ongoing development of a school in a contemporary context of schooling.

**Understanding Traditional Organisational Life and the Place of Learning**

There are no such places as schools in Aboriginal society. There are no walls, no Principals, no education department, no one to determine what society expected children to know to be functioning western society members, and learning is based on knowledge for survival. Perhaps the education system does the same but is clearly entrenched in western ideologies of norms and expectations.

Traditionally, Aboriginal people lived as an interdependent/intradependent unit that ensured through the laws of living that its people and society functioned in a systematically organised manner. The laws of survival provided a basis for structure and order to ensure both economic and social structures remained intact. Learning was an everyday activity to do with eating, relationships, family, laws, and lore. Levels of learning existed as children and
adults were chosen for higher learning. Rites of passage existed for men and women in learning and law. These carried with them responsibilities for other members of the family or group.

Prior to settlement this system worked in a productive and cohesive manner to ensure the survival of each other and the ongoing survival of the family group, hence the bigger family, and tribal group.

Colonisation of Gippsland was mostly a violent process, massacres and land acquisition decimated a population of peoples leaving them dislocated and destitute. Herded off their lands and onto the two missions to be christianised and civilised for their own good. Some families avoided the missions and went bush.

The impact of settlement and re-location on the lives of the generations are ingrained in the story of my family and the knowledge from this story. Therefore I am constantly reminded of my personal family story. My mother’s people lived off the land and continued their traditional practices, their language and maintained the family unit. My father’s family lived under the policies of protectionism and assimilation, under management of the Aboriginal Protection Board, on the missions, on the fringes and moved around between the city, the mission and towns.

After white settlement in the Gippsland region and following the reports of the protectors, the government at the time, decided on a course of action to protect the Aboriginal people. The people were herded onto the two missions Lake Tyers in East Gippsland, and Ramahyuck near Stratford respectively to protect them from the ‘evils’ of the wider society. During the missionary period ‘christenising’ and ‘civilising’ the natives was the main aim of the protection act of government. The wider society did not value the traditional ways and knowledge and laws of the people. Under the government act, the appointed
church ministers and protectors set about christenising and civilizing the people.

Subsequent practices and policies ensured the discontinuation of the passing on of knowledge. The old ways of sharing knowledge orally was done in secret, through the generations, in country, by those with knowledge. Mission education varied from place to place. Some provided qualified teachers while others provided primary level skill in schooling. The focus of education was training for domestic service and farm apprenticeships.

**Four Generations of Surviving Off the Missions**

The policy of assimilation further failed with forced movement into townships. The lack of planning for this move impacted severely on those sent away from the missions. Support previously received in rations, housing, planned daily work, and skills seriously disadvantaged many. Perhaps, having a greater impact was the attitudes of the outside world. For many, their survival remained the same, for others it became another environment to learn to be survivors in an inhospitable and dangerous terrain with no guidance and no support.

For those who stayed on the mission survival depended on their allocation of provisions. They did not have to live on the fringes they lived in relative comfort. They received a basic education, healthcare, and their lives were decided by managers. At this time many children were taken for training as apprentices and domestic workers. Many became dependant on the system and dependant on those who made decisions on their behalf; they were complacent if not oppressed. Those living off the missions became champions and fighters in the system.

Living on the fringes was a matter of survival for families. These families were denied rations. Life was difficult and hard times were experienced by displaced
people. Many survived only through helping each other, and by caring for and sharing with each other. My parent’s and grandparent’s experiences of this life were difficult but they were rich in their united struggle. Schooling was not an opportunity available to many, nor was it essential to participate as other issues consumed the daily and community lives of people. These included how to feed their families, how to access medical treatment, keeping a vigilant watch for the children who were always under threat of removal, often by the police, finding work and looking out for family.

**Movement of Families from Lake Tyers Mission to Drouin, Morwell, Moe and Traralgon**

Subsequent waves of moving off the mission to towns gave people access to schools, work, and other amenities in the wider community. These families’ experiences were different to those of relations moved off earlier. They were provided access to housing, schooling, and work. They were accommodated in relatively stable communities of working people, employed in industries which offered long term opportunities for their families and in areas with schools. Some families were successful in their endeavor to live in the outside world where they made their own decisions and learned to struggle and fight for their rights.

Those people who were re-located were, for many, not coping in mainstream society that was veiled in racist attitudes. The chance to live both ways was not something those who relocated from the mission had experienced before. Their families did not generally undertake seasonal work. They relied on the system and became dependant on others to take care of them. They did not have to survive in the same way as their relatives and they accepted the new life in town. They returned to the mission for sorry business and to visit family on the mission.
School, however did not offer them a welcoming environment. Their time in school was mostly a negative experience and not successful. This has ultimately impacted on their circumstances within the community. The changed policies of Aboriginal Affairs, from providing dependence living on the missions to assimilation in the towns, failed families. Those who lived in towns accepted what had been decided for them, they were not fighters. They complied with the new rules and struggled with their families. Their dependency was transferred from mission managers to government welfare dependency and their families accepted a handout system. They learnt to live their lives not expecting any more and not asking for more.

The 1959 Survey Report from the Psychology and Guidance Branch of the Education Department for State School No 1319, Lake Tyers, tells the story of the attitudes experienced by four generations of Aboriginal children in a western education system. These attitudes and policies of the education system failed Aboriginal children living in the Latrobe Valley for four generations. Low expectations and a welfare mentality toward Aboriginal families have generated successive failure of the children.

In this survey report (Aborigines Protection Board Report 1959) they wrote:

The educational problems which the aboriginal children at this school present can only be discussed meaningfully against the background of the Settlement itself. It seems that the aboriginals at Lake Tyers, with perhaps a few exceptions, form a dependent community, showing little initiative and taking little or no responsibility for their own welfare. They are housed, fed and clothed by the board and receive a small income in return for what appears to be largely a token of labour on the farm………..their occupational expectations are of the most unskilled level, and their educational standards are low…………..in general their living standards are well below those of the usual school community as are their standards of personal hygiene and child care. Their children are, therefore, under strong social pressure towards values and attitudes which are generally at variance with those of a white community.
1. Their poor motivation towards educational success which is not seen by them as a means towards any end which they value
2. The lack of parents support towards raising of their educational standards or, indeed, towards the inculcation and strengthening of values implicit in our education system.
3. their low level of job expectation
4. their poor language skills, affecting all forms of written and oral English
5. their very limited background of experience
6. irregular and broken attendances, and
7. Uncleanliness and poorly balanced diet reduce their powers of sustained concentration.

Under these conditions they are almost inevitably educationally retarded, but it is these factors related to their cultural-social background, rather than lack of ability to succeed, which are considered to be the basic cause of their poor educational levels.

Over this time, many families moved off the missions under various policies and programs. At least three generations have relied on a dependency system to survive. In return, no demands were made for improving their access to work, to improving the schooling system for their children who, like their parents and grandparents before who left the mission, opted out of the system of education being offered.

As the quilts are the artefacts of the narrative, they share the story. As the product of this research, they share the methodology and enquiry that is respectful of sharing oral stories as done traditionally. These quilts are both the vision and voice of the school in a similar manner to stories represented in paintings. These quilts are intrinsically linked to knowledge. This knowledge is described in the quilts and in the narrative of the school.
Chapter 4: My Quilts as a Narrative Medium

Figure 1: My first quilt
Knowledge gifted from my parents, my elders and honouring my ancestors. Intrinsically linked system of knowledge.

Figure 2: My Second Quilt
A Narrative of the Woolum Bellum School experience, its history, success, and issues. Explored within my ways of knowing.
This chapter takes the reader into the quilts. These quilts made as artefacts of knowledge tell the story using my ways of knowing. I focus on how they express how I learnt these things from my family and why it is important to share this knowledge. I am introducing the reader to the key elements of success for the school and the disablers with the impact these have on the school and community. I present each quilt as one but show how the relational between emerges to enlighten the possibilities of and an understanding of a different world view. I give an understanding of Indigenous knowledge in relation to an education that is related and interrelated. I present on the second quilt the story on panels. They give a social background, the establishment of the school, the key enablers, the importance of curriculum and language, the changes and turmoil and distress of the school and its community. They use my ways of knowing to
give meaning to this distress, the impact on community and the outcomes of external troubles and finally the final dismissal.

This chapter gives the explanation of the quilts in the development of Indigenous knowledge and the important framework this provides for Aboriginal children in their education and identity. The stories in the quilts present a medium to share a narrative in ways the community can relate to, in knowing the story and the importance of this school. In particular, they present visually a shared knowledge disregarded by and not understood by a mono-cultural education system focussed only on its own agendas.

In the last chapter, I framed my conclusions around using my ways of knowing to inform my research methods and principles. I have used this knowledge to tell a story using quilts as a narrative medium. I have reflected on answering my research questions by revisiting the narrative in the quilts, and my conclusions on these questions. I have discussed using quilts to inform the community as a culturally appropriate way of sharing story, how my principles have underpinned my method of enquiry. I share my role in this story with my family for, as they continue to grow in knowledge and take on responsibilities, they will have my quilts for reflection in their decisions. Finally, I ponder what I have learnt and conclude that I have always known because my ways of knowing have given me greater insight to what can be and what might become from my work.
Creating a Site of Knowledge: I am a quilt maker. I make quilts.

Making these quilts has created an opportunity for me to share stories in a meaningful way. I could write this story in a book but, my family and my community will relate better to a story represented on a quilt. They will not read a big, thick book so my quilt is an artefact of storytelling. Traditionally, stories are passed on orally to share knowledge, to keep the laws, to teach about ways of behaving. Our dreaming stories pass on this knowledge. These quilts give voice to the story of the school and document this story visually. I want to share this story with the community and my family in a way that is respectful of our ways.

To me this is important context for earlier in the story. It really helps to understand the context of the threads that I am drawing together. I have been listening to the community to learn from this experience, and to identify the enablers, barriers and critical success factors in creating sustainable learning environments for Aboriginal children. In particular a learning environment which encourage success and cultural understanding (Lawrence 1994).

Quilt Number One

Indigenous Knowledge: Foundation of the School

This quilt represents a visual story of Indigenous ways of knowing about country, in the physical and spiritual world. The knowledge given to us by our Ancestors as custodians is passed on through story and ceremony. The relationship of the land and its people is told through the generations. This knowledge provides us with laws for living, for relationships, for healing, dance and song. This knowledge is shared in this quilt for the benefit of the community.
Quilt Number Two

Unmasking the Issues

This quilt represents the journey for the Woolum Bellum School thus far. The original vision of the school was to create a place of learning that acknowledged Aboriginal ways of knowing and strengthened our individual and collective identities. There are positive stories from the Woolum Bellum experience but the current internal and external struggles are threatening its future. These issues have created many cracks within and outside of the school; power plays, a dismissal of Indigenous knowledge; and a pretence by the system to listen.

Quilt Number Three

Listening Properly: Indigenous Voices in Education

This quilt represents the place for Aboriginal ways of knowing in learning. It reflects the many dimensions of what is needed to make the school a success for the children, including factors such as the environment, management, curriculum, community support and understanding. The Woolum Bellum School has the potential to be a place that achieves change for Indigenous students, strengthening and reinforcing identity. It can help students achieve success and transform their lives. Other schools, the education system and the community can all benefit from a school that makes a difference.

The First Quilt: Indigenous Knowledge: Foundation of the School

This quilt is about Aboriginal knowledge. I have made the quilt as a way of sharing knowledge in a visual form. It brings Country to people and people to Country. The quilt tells the story of the philosophy behind the Woolum Bellum School. In this quilt, I have wanted to incorporate Indigenous knowledge because that has been so important to the development of the Woolum Bellum
School. The School has given us an opportunity to share cultural knowledge with Koorie children.

I remember when we were first asked if we wanted to put in an Expression of Interest for the KODE School. We recognised that mainstream schooling was not servicing our children’s cultural needs and sense of identity. We saw it as an opportunity to bring back cultural knowledge and Aboriginal family values into a learning environment. We also saw it as a way of reviving language and cultural knowledge and having ownership of how that knowledge was shared.

A key strategy we used in doing this was the development of the Bataluk Trail and curriculum. We went through a process of getting permission to use the Bataluk Trail from the community and developing curriculum around the sites of significance on the Trail. This included the Lake Tyers Mission, the Knobb Reserve and the Sale Wetlands with its bush food, birds and plants. We developed a curriculum around language, stories and local history. It gave knowledge that these children would never have received in mainstream schools.

**Designing This Quilt**

The design of this quilt did not come easily. It is different to other quilts I’ve made for particular people and have designed them with that person in mind. This quilt is a bit about me and that can be hard to represent. It requires me to ask myself what I stand for, what is important and what that might mean.

The knowledge of how people survived on Country and passed on that knowledge comes from my own family. I wanted the quilt to represent that knowledge. This knowledge has been passed on in the development of the curriculum at Woolum Bellum to provide a culturally relevant learning for our Koorie children. What is represented on this quilt reminds me of one of the
places I take people to show them knowledge. It has trees and a creek and is called the Knobb Reserve. It is a classroom of knowledge.

My mother is gifted with both Gunnai and Ngarigo knowledge. Her images of the Bogong Moths are my inspiration for using the moths in this quilt. The Gunnai people used to go up to the mountains and feast on the Bogong Moths. People traveled to the mountains and feasted on the Bogong Moths for three months of the year and traded. They shared knowledge and exchanged artefacts and exchanged women for wives.

*Figure 6: Bogong Moths*

The scarred trees on the quilt represent the shields and canoes that came from the trees. They symbolise the knowledge about how those things were used on Country and what was important for living on Country. The trees represent the knowledge about living on Country and the making of artefacts, such as coolamans which were used for carrying water and for gathering food. The middle tree on the design is the Canoe Tree. The canoes were used on the Gippsland Lakes to gather swan eggs and to help people move from place to place, and to fish. The trees were also used to help make the fishing nets.
The creeks and the rivers provided an important source of food. The grasses represent the Cumbungee or the Tarook which was a significant plant and used for many purposes. The quilt shows the sea and the fish in the lakes and the waters. The fish were trapped by using the string from the trees. The fishhooks were made by the women from kangaroo bones.

Figure 7: Sources of Food

Knowledge has been passed on to me that I feel I can represent in the quilt. It shows men’s knowledge as well as women’s knowledge. The designs that frame the quilt represent the male and the female of the Gunnai. The inspiration for these has come from my brother’s work. He has now passed on. He was a significant artist.

The shells represent the seafood that was eaten along the coast line. The shells represent the importance of the water and the seafood that came from the water.

Figure 8: Cumbungee or the Tarook

The bark canoes were used by both men and women for fishing. The coolamans in the trees were used by women. Both the men and the women went up the mountains. The gathering of the bush food is mostly women’s knowledge so that’s probably more about me.
Sharing Cultural Knowledge

This level of knowledge is generally what I share with people. There is another level of knowledge that I don’t share because I haven’t been asked to share that yet and it hasn’t yet been permitted for me to share it. Both my parents are Elders and the knowledge has been passed on through my grandparents. I have been very privileged to have had that knowledge and not been removed from it, either physically or mentally.

I’m still learning. I’m always learning and while I’m learning I’m being trusted. I’m moving into new knowledge and that’s important to do. It’s something I’ve been learning since I was little but it’s developed much more strongly as I’ve got older.

For me to be able to pass knowledge on and share it with the kids and adults of this community is really important work for me to do. I have been privileged to learn it and it is a privilege to pass it on. It’s important for me to do it and I take it seriously. It is my responsibility.

The Elders won’t pass on knowledge if they don’t trust you with it. I’ve seen this when people come up to Elders and say ‘Tell me about this’ and they don’t share. You have to wait. It’s all about waiting and listening and if you miss it they may not say it again. It’s about sitting, listening, waiting and making sure that you remember. They expect you to listen the first time.

I’m getting older now and I’m a grandmother. It’s important for me to pass on that knowledge to my kids and grandkids. They are wanting more now. They are ready to learn more. They have grown up with this knowledge. They want to share.
The Second Quilt: Unmasking the Issues

This quilt represents the journey for Woolum Bellum. Our original vision for the school was to be a place of learning that acknowledged both worlds and celebrated our ways of knowing through curriculum, management, and leadership. The school would strengthen the identities of the children and community in celebrating and learning. There have emerged many positive stories of success and developing a place of learning which respects the Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Over the years the experience of Woolum Bellum has been of many internal and external struggles which have been threatening to its future. These issues have been represented in the quilt through Indigenous ways of knowing as I know. These issues both within and outside the school have been created by power plays; the dismissal of community and its knowledge; a system of not listening properly and a lack of respect.

A Fabric Narrative of the Woolum Bellum Story

The first panel: The Church and mission days of the people gave the community little or no education. It was based on providing a ‘civilising’ influence on the people. It was often the task of the mission manager’s wife to teach. The mission days of education were based on the following assumptions from the Lake Tyers School report of 1959: no aspirations, no expectations, exclusion from town schools. At Lake Tyers the education of the people was of a third grade standard, followed by vocational training to make assimilation processes a way of life. The Ramahyuck Mission was known to be providing the best western education possible to the people. But the people, in the process of assimilation, discontinued their practices and knowledge systems of educating, planning, ceremony and decision making. It was not encouraged in the practices of the church or in policies under the Protection Act. The threat of alienation from family and no rations for family quelled the yearning for the old ways.
The second panel: The School: Woolum Bellum is located in the town of Morwell. The Koorie population is approximately 500 people. Not all the people come from Gippsland but those who do have lived here for three generations and were the first wave from Lake Tyers brought to the towns in the 1900s. The promise of educational opportunities, employment opportunities and social opportunities of living in town brought with it racism, exclusion, a struggle to live and survive in a community intolerant of difference. The struggle to exist as a people continued in family and within the Koorie community, and the issue of marginalisation from society recounted its own issues. These impacts over the generations dismissed the social, emotional and educational needs of the children, and left a community to disappear into poverty and despair.
The third panel: The establishment of the school and concept of KODE gave the community an opportunity to change and bring back the knowledge to a school which respected our knowledge, our people, through a state funded school. In the Committee of Management and in the school, decision-making processes were based on tradition, collaborative and collective with men, women and children in a circle where everyone gets to speak. Where everyone has an opportunity to have their opinions heard and a collective decision is made for the benefit of all, as opposed to directive and top-down decision making. This process created equality in leadership, in management, and in supportive roles of the school. The circles represent the ways decisions were made as taught to me, where the talking circles include both men and women and the whole of the community.

The fourth panel: In making decisions about the school, the key curriculum, the language, the stories, the history and country would be the cornerstone of the decision surrounding identity, knowledge, and curriculum. In it is the third cycle based on the Bataluk trail, the sequence, and the content.

Our old people, represented by the crows, speak Gunnai language across the land and carry it forward for the future generation. When there are many of the people sitting around talking, our old people tell us they are the crows talking.

Our story about Jiddelick is a favorite and represents one of the dreaming stories of the country. It is about country and about the animals and birds who teach us things. Our people learnt from these stories.

The knowledge of the land, including the rivers and waterways, the sky, the trees and bush foods are part of our knowledge systems to be imparted to the children for their survival and to learn who they are and how they belong. The mission days and policies of government sought to deny their heritage and knowledge system; the mono-cultural education system continues the practice.
The fifth panel: The Aboriginal flag is a modern design of identity, unity and strength, knowledge and respect. The symbolism of the flag upside down takes a contemporary view of the issues of the school, not being from the old ways
and not understood in the context of the different worlds. It represents the sign of trouble created through changes in leadership and management of the school. It is a distress symbol of the elements of the school, the staff, the children, the community, the education system, the Aboriginal ways of doing in the KODE concept. It is a powerful symbol understood across many levels and by all peoples.

Figure 14: The Aboriginal Flag

The sixth panel: In our way, the willy-willy is a sign of distress, it also represents trouble and it is a sign of trouble to come. Because of what is happening. The emu wrens are Dyettgun and Yeerung, the male and female totems of the people whose spirit is caught up with the problems and trouble and whose spirit are being pulled by the power plays; the dismissal of our ways, and the knowledge; and more so, by the lack of respect and support from the system.

Figure 15: The Willy Willy
The seventh panel: The people have turned their backs on the school. This panel represents their beliefs in what the school could be and their dreams of having a school which would give their children a real chance. The way of the people in the community is to walk and this is evident in the decline of support and students. Their dissatisfaction with the school management became their way of showing disillusionment.

Figure 16: Disillusion

The eighth panel: The review identified many issues in the school. The review of the KODE schooling concept was premised on change in the context of the current policies and outcomes of the state. The mono-cultural education system continues to fail the children, what they chose to identify within the school to change was blatantly misguided. More so, it was a real opportunity to review, plan, organise and reshape the concept. Unfortunately, as a community our economic independence is reliant on government decisions. Allowing time to make a difference over a sustainable period of time is not on the agenda. This part of the story has the issues which lead to the re-configuration. Our ways of cleansing is to smoke or burn a place or issue to bring about renewal; to give clarity and strength to the issue and to move on. The burnt rag represents a cleansing.
The ninth panel: This represents the State School Registration Number 8852, Aboriginal curriculum Bataluk Curriculum, decision-making processes of the KODE concept, all dragged back into the box. All discarded and disregarded because a mono-cultural education system lacks real understanding, the willingness to listen has gone, the token gesture of acknowledging a new way, the power plays, the lack of real leadership, the opportunity has been lost to the only way the education system knows how: to the western ideologies of education, its socialising processes and the continued assimilation policies of government.
We know our kids live in the contemporary world but the evidence is clear and while that there are many successes, our children have been failed.

**The Third Quilt: Elements with Knowledge and Enablers of Success**

This quilt is a visual model of the key elements as enablers. These key elements are deep with layers of knowledge. The quilt is the messenger - a model with layers of information for how the KODE concept can inspire a monocultural education system to look beyond the economic focus of education designed to skill a workforce. This model represents the key elements to achieving a successful education environment for Aboriginal children.

As a messenger, this quilt shows how the KODE school community created the tools to achieve the education aspirations of a community. Listening properly and learning from different ways of knowing is intrinsically linked to listening to the spaces in between to building community and giving voice.

The three circles represent the decision-making processes that empowered the community and underpinned its growing success: community involvement, the Bataluk curriculum and leadership across the school.

This quilt represents the place for Aboriginal ways of knowing in learning. It reflects the many dimensions of what is needed to make the school a success for the children, including factors such as the environment, management, curriculum, community support and understanding. The Woomul Bellum School has the potential to be a place that achieves change for Aboriginal students, in strengthening and reinforcing identity. It can create student achievement and success to transform their lives. Other schools, the education system and the community can benefit from a school that makes a difference.

The border reinforces the strength of the community and the wider community giving their support and sharing knowledge with the school. The surrounding
strength of the school community is critical at different levels. Firstly, the role the school plays in the wider community for its knowledge in supporting cultural knowledge to other schools, the ability of the school to provide a learning environment in which children identify and needs are being met at different levels: health, well-being, social and emotional support in a culturally responsive manner.

The circle of community represents the success of the KODE school concept in decision-making to have a greater impact on the education, environment, leadership and management across the school in policies, curriculum, and appointment of staff to the school. The community involvement on the committee of management, in working groups, in development of curriculum and in implementation of curriculum, and in the overall decision-making of the school created a congenial, cohesive, productive and successful educational environment which met both the educational and identity needs of the Aboriginal children who attended the school.

The second circle represents the Bataluk Curriculum. This highlights the process of working with the community, the development of a curriculum to meet the requirements of the system and to reinforce the Aboriginal identity of the students. More than that, the Bataluk Curriculum represented the development of knowledge. This sharing of knowledge engaged staff, students and community built on a foundation of Gunna language, and which incorporated learning about, history, culture, stories, and Aboriginal knowledge. These students, who are generations removed from their heritage through an assimilation policy, an urban lifestyle that alienates them from their heritage, and most importantly, their involvement with Elders who can teach and share their knowledge.

The third circle represents leadership in the school and with the community. The development of trust and of relationships with community both in the school and with the COM created an environment of mutual respect. Where
responsibility and success shared the pathway to decisions made on behalf of the school. In the school, the staff worked in teams and developed team teaching approaches to implementation of the Bataluk Curriculum. Staff shared responsibility for all aspects of students’ wellbeing and staff genuinely accepted the cultural differences of the children and worked with them rather than wanting them to change. Using teaching and learning pedagogy which reinforced cultural responsibility such as sharing of resources, peer learning, across age learning, learning on country and incorporating this into products through technology and art.

This was further enhanced with the involvement of community educators, community members with knowledge, agency support and decision making processes which were inclusive and open.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

I have used my ways of knowing to inform my chosen research methods and shared this knowledge on quilts as a narrative medium of this knowledge. The aim of this thesis was to describe and tell the story of Woolum Bellum School thus far. My research questions that I have tried to answer are: 1. what led to the establishment of the Woolum Bellum KODE School? What are the critical success factors of the school attaining autonomy within the Victorian State Education system?

I hope that through this research I have answered these questions. The establishment of Woolum Bellum School comes from a series of events, but also from the opportunity to establish a relevant learning environment for Aboriginal children that focussed on being an Aboriginal person and part of an Aboriginal world and place. Also, this narrative shares a view on the historical nature of schooling and education for Aboriginal people which has influenced their opportunities through policy decisions.

I also discussed the key elements of success in the model of KODE schooling. These key success factors were adopted and successful in the first instance but eroded and diminished in the system. They were not understood, measured only in terms of another failed agenda, not embracing the opportunity to achieve long term change. The focus of any change always made within the realms of assimilationist goals. In my opinion, it is idealist to believe that the Woolum Bellum School can ever gain autonomy within the Victorian State Education system for the following reasons: the system is a mono-cultural system with a myopic world view that cannot acknowledge other worldviews and; the bureaucracy and power does not empower Aboriginal people in real decision making as we have seen from the manner in which the system flat-lined the school, decisions are made then a process used to enforce these decisions. A preparedness to listen has been clearly misunderstood.
I also discussed and use my quilts to demonstrate how narrative can inform knowledge in a culturally appropriate way. Sharing my personal story of my ways of knowing and my experience of the education system has allowed me to examine my role in the Woolum Bellum School, and the need to reinforce ways of knowing. I discussed how my cultural ways of knowing underpinned my principles of research in my method of data collection, my analysis and in my presentation of the narrative in quilts.

Upon reflection of this story, I am reminded of Miriam Ungunmerr’s words and my teachings from my Elders that the tree in the middle of the bushfire where the sap is still flowing under the ground and the roots are still strong. Our people are used to the struggle and the long waiting. We still wait for the white people to understand us better. We have ourselves spent many years learning about the white man’s ways; we have learned to speak the white man’s language; we have listened to what he had to say. This learning and listening should go both ways.

Listening properly informed my ways of knowing and has applicability in the principles used for doing research. Connection to these principles can articulate a way forward for Aboriginal researchers. As Aboriginal people we offer a different world view and insight into how we view the world and understand our relationship to the world we live in and share.

Finally, I want to talk to my family. I want you to read this as part of your journey in life and to pass on to your children, grandchildren and our future generation this knowledge from Gwandi (grandmother). As much as I have been able to and can, I have shared this knowledge through the quilts. It has been a long journey for me and there have been times I have not been able to fulfil my other obligations as your mother and grandmother. I have dabbled in my cultural responsibilities and look forward to returning once again spending time
with my parents and family. My life experiences, in both worlds, I share with you and know that as a journey, I have a long way to go.

As you walk in both worlds I am strengthened by the knowledge that I can and have given you your connections to family, to knowledge and to yourself with your Aboriginal world view to guide you, your children and grandchildren for the journey before you. These are my gifts to you.

*What I Have Learned*

I have learned that what I have always known. The western view of the world and the systems within will never change. But the ways in which we as Aboriginal people use our knowledge within the system in places and in positions of empowerment can and will open the spaces for dialogue. I have learned that seeking opportunities to have an appropriate discourse to gain understanding and to build respectful relationships are wise endeavours towards meaningful opportunities for Aboriginal people. To make the western system work towards developing an understanding of multiple views of the world in the community, and always in our world with guidance from our Elders and Ancestors, is where there are possibilities.

The experience of Woolum Bellum, both from a personal and educational perspective, has flagged that the opportunity to seek difference has already been tested. This success can be proven in respect of seeking outcomes for Aboriginal children. The inclusive role of community in a school like Woolum Bellum has, for both the education system in which we work and the community, enabled many current practices to be challenged, particularly conducting business in a culturally inclusive manner. The experience of Woolum Bellum has created a new discourse in Victoria for Aboriginal education which needs to be voiced. Its positive impact on lives which now impacts on the community through people and families may not have been noticed within all the turmoil of recent times, but those impacts are certainly
testimony to Woolum Bellum. The development of the Batatluk curriculum, the success of engaging Aboriginal people in decision-making over a long period is testament to the nature of that involvement, the ability to deliver a curriculum which has addressed the issue of identity within school for Aboriginal children.

This knowledge has not been gathered by the education system because their only interest was in statistics, and measurement of benchmarks. This was a missed opportunity. This information can provide access to knowledge to make changes which can impact more significantly than measuring reading achievement. There are other experienced non-Aboriginal people who have the ability and share the knowledge of what it takes, and only not what works. What it takes has a longer term impact, it takes training, rethinking about the how and what and more importantly the why. It can assist in the development of guidelines to implementation of new policy.

The collaborative processes built upon at Woolum Bellum offer changes to pre-service training, curriculum implementation, and management processes to engage community members.

My experience in schools as an educator at many levels is that with policy there is no one quick fix that can be applied to meet the change sought. There is an insidious form of colonial racism in the system which seeks to make Aboriginal children assimilate. The prevalence of this racism assumes that for Aboriginal children their success in society is to learn and to adopt the values of Western society. Recognition that our children live in two worlds, and that their identity as Aboriginal children is essential in the current education system whose focus is mostly trying to find what works. Real change and recognition in policies of a the diversity of the population within the system is what it will take, and not in the short term, but over a longer period.
Many educators both Indigenous and non-Indigenous have sought to offer alternative ways to change the system, in curriculum, in policy, in getting kids to school, and in engaging community.

**Significance of my Work**

As an Aboriginal who has learnt ‘both ways’ and experienced education in ‘both ways’ sharing the journey with Woolum Bellum has identified the need to speak to the policies, to the educators, to the staff at Woolum Bellum who have endured the journey together. This work will give voice to our ways of knowing and our ways through our ontology and epistemology of being Aboriginal.

Since the concept of a schooling environment such as Koorie Open Door School (KODE) lessons have been learnt. If the lessons from the issues are listened to, then schools like KODE can be viable alternatives for the success of Aboriginal children in a mono-cultural education system. The journey of the school clearly identifies key enablers for success. These include establishing effective management structures, a well planned leadership process, engagement of students, real respect for community and the processes which incorporate these elements. Most importantly, it translates into a model which is transformative, and one that both satisfies and respects the Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing for the wellbeing of our future generations.

Woolum Bellum offered new ways to meet the challenges in Aboriginal Education that are the topics of reports and policies. This experience created new ways to collaborate, forged new thinking and implementation in curriculum, ways to engage the community in decision-making and the processes of engaging, increased ways to foster identity through indigenous language and connection to community and country.
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