Title: Improving education for Aboriginal children and youth - "More than bums on seats in classrooms": The significance of cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Sheelagh Daniels-Mayes[1]

Karen Sinclair[2]

David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research,

Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences

University of South Australia

Abstract:

In his 2014 Close the Gap statement, the Prime Minister added a new target: end the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years. In response, Aboriginal leader Dr Tom Calma stated that improving Indigenous education outcomes "will take more than just getting bums on seats in classrooms". This paper argues that improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth is complex and goes beyond mere rates of attendance at school; that improvement will come when culture is placed at the centre of policy through culturally competent and culturally responsive pedagogy. That, in short, culture is the "more" that Tom Calma argues for. The paper grows out of the ongoing post-graduate

[1] Sheelagh Daniels-Mayes is a Kamilaroi woman originally from New South Wales and is currently in her third year of her PhD. Her essential research question is: What does successful teaching of Aboriginal mainstream high school students look like? My research is located within the theoretical frame of culturally responsive pedagogy and uses culturally responsive school ethnography.
2 Karen Sinclair is a Ngarrindjeri woman and Early years educator currently undertaking her PhD in Indigenous studies. Her research proposes to investigate educators' perspectives towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Competence as outlined in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) through Q Methodology and Narrative interviews.

research of two Aboriginal students who, as qualified teachers, share a common passion for the quality teaching of Aboriginal children and youth that prepares them for living successfully in two worlds.

Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2012:3) high-performing education systems are those that combine equity and quality and "give all children opportunities for good quality education". Though the Australian system is performing well for many students, this is not the case for everyone. Research shows that Aboriginal[3] students are not achieving on par with their non-Aboriginal peers, particularly in areas of literacy, numeracy, and rates of attendance and retention (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014; Dreise, 2014).

In the 2014 annual Closing the Gap Statement the focus for improving Aboriginal educational outcomes shifted heavily to school attendance with the Prime Minister announcing that "indigenous school attendance data will be part of the next Closing the Gap report and all subsequent reports under this Government (House of Representatives, 2014). The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attendance is to be closed within 5 years with a 90 per cent plus school attendance rate regardless of their percentage of Aboriginal students (House of Representatives, 2014). In effect, school attendance was identified as the key task that would finally lead to significant improvements in Aboriginal educational outcomes and in turn long-term social and economic improvements for Aboriginal communities.

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[3] Officially, the term 'Indigenous Australians' refers to Aboriginal peoples from mainland Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. Many Indigenous people do not use the term `Indigenous' when identifying themselves and their communities and prefer to use `Aboriginal'. Throughout this paper 'Aboriginal' is used. The term 'Indigenous" is used to refer to international Indigenous peoples except when directly quoting scholarly work. We note too that the term 'Aboriginal' is the preferred term used by Elders involved in our research with 'Indigenous' being viewed as a 'dirty word'.

The employment of 400 school attendance officers in the Northern Territory is one such outcome of this focus (Dreise, 2014). Dreise (2014:81) states that the Australian government appears to be operating on the basis that getting young people to school is the most important first step. Likewise, Aboriginal Leader Tom Calma responded to the new attendance target by calling for a "big picture" on Aboriginal education. Calma (2014) further states that "improving indigenous education outcomes will take more than just getting bums on seats in classrooms". Calma (2014) argues further that a holistic approach is needed and that "getting people in the door is not going to mean you're going to learn". Consequently, the performance of schools needs to be assessed according to all that it does and not just a few areas that are relatively easy to measure.

This paper reports on the ongoing research projects of two Aboriginal post-graduate students. Though differing in the age of participants, theoretical framework and research design our commitment is the same: improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students involves the placing of culture at the centre of education. In this way we argue that the "more" that Tom Calma calls for is culture with educational systems becoming culturally competent and responsive for Aboriginal students. We discuss the purpose of education, the role culture plays in building a sense of belonging and identity at school for successful learning, the significance of cultural competence and responsiveness and quality teaching. We draw on international and national literature that demonstrates that real systemic change can be achieved when culture is placed at the centre of thinking.

Purpose of education

Education is generally considered to be both a desirable and indispensable experience for all children. Consequently, compulsory attendance at some type of formal educational institution is required of all children for at least a decade so that they can prepare to become good citizens who participate efficiently in the workforce. Therefore, education is a very effective tool for incorporating people into the dominant culture (Harrison, 2011) and as such remains an institution of assimilation. In recent decades the educational landscape has become increasingly dominated by the neoliberalist agenda which values privatisation, deregulation, and advancement of the so-called free market over the public sector and the common good (Garcia and Martinez, 2007).

In this market driven environment the landscape of education has been moulded into one where accountability, standardised curriculum, high stakes testing, performance indicators, and corporate style management - such as attendance records - are prominent (Burgess, 2009; Klenowski, 2009). It is a model where best practise and educational success are defined in terms of competition between individuals and between groups (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Connell, 2009). It is a political framework that, we argue, does not bode well for the recognition of cultural diversity.

Writing of New Zealand Maori students Durie' (2001:4) argues that:

> To the extent that the purpose of education is to prepare people for participation in society, it needs to be remembered that preparation for participation in Maori society is also required. If after twelve or so years of formal education a Maori youth were

totally unprepared to interact within te ao Maori (the Maori world), then no matter what else had been learned education would have been incomplete.

Students from marginalised cultural backgrounds may feel pressured to disown their cultural identity in order that they assimilate into the majority culture and thereby gain some sense of belonging. This, however, can interfere with their emotional and cognitive development and result in school failure (Sheets, 1999). A sense of cultural identity and, the active recognition and validation of Aboriginal cultures and their languages by schools, is critical to student wellbeing and success at school writes the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (2010:112). This would strongly suggest that a school that centralises and validates a student's cultural identity facilitates a sense of belonging, well-being and ultimately educational success.

Culture, identity and belonging

Culture is a complex and problematic term that has attracted much attention over the decades. Demonstrating this complexity Erickson (2007), for example, identifies at least seven different ways of understanding culture. Similarly, Hollins (1996) provides a six step process for teachers to develop and construct their understanding of the term on an individual level. Therefore our aim here is not to define this complex term but rather outline our understanding of culture that guides our respective research projects.

We borrow, for example, from New Zealand's Effective Teaching Program (ETP) where culture is described in terms of both its visible (i.e. signs, images and

iconography that are immediately recognisable as representing that culture) and, invisible elements (i.e. values, morals, communication styles, decision making and problem-solving processes along with the world views and knowledge - producing processes that assists individuals and groups with meaning and sense-making (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Teddy, 2007:2). This description highlights that culture is both the visible or recognisable iconography of a people as well as the invisible lens through which we look at the world. It is the context within which we operate and make sense of the world and its influences on how we process learning, solve problems, and teach" (Lee, Cosby and deBaca, 2007). Ultimately, culture is "the foundation upon which individual identity is built" (Tripcony, 2010:7).

For Aboriginal people identity pertains to ancestry and country of origin be that freshwater, Saltwater, Desert or Rainforest. It is not about genetics or skin colour, but about relationships and obligations with people and place (country), or kinship (Dudgeon et al. 2010). It is, in short, who you are and where you belong. Weeks (1990:88) insists that identity is attuned to belonging. It encompasses what you have in common with and what differentiates you from others. He suggests that, at its most basic, identity "gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core of our individuality...it is also about your social relationships, your complex involvement with others".

Our research seeks to demonstrate that culture and, in turn, identity and belonging are inter-woven and paramount to educational success. Culturally competent and responsive education recognises that a students' culture is a tool for learning and not a problem to be solved or eliminated. As Ortner (1991:187) contends:

However much we now recognise that cultures are riddled with inequality, differential understanding, and differential advantage . . . , nonetheless they remain for the people who live within them sources of value, meaning, and ways of understanding and resisting—the world.

We argue in our research that Aboriginality cannot be left at the school gate rather it needs to be invited into the school grounds so that Aboriginal people can live productively as Aboriginal people not mainstreamed or "whitestreamed" (Milne, 2013) individuals. Connell (2009:222) emphasises that "The educational task now is not to insert Aboriginal children more insistently into an unchallenged Eurocentric system it is to change the institutions of education to make them more culturally relevant to Aboriginal children". In the next move we outline our respective research undertakings and their significance which takes up Connell's challenge of making the institution of education more meaningful for Aboriginal students.

A shared passion

Although research suggests that educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are improving, this progress is slow and notable gaps in achievement persist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Gray and Beresford, 2008). Contrary to popular belief that the majority of Aboriginal peoples live in remote communities, more than 85% of Aboriginal peoples live in major cities and regional towns with Aboriginal children dispersed throughout 9,000 mainstream schools of which, according to NAPLAN data, 30%-40% were found to be underperforming (Hughes and Hughes, 2012).

Reasons for underperformance and slow progress in Aboriginal education cited in the literature include student ability and motivation, lack of parental involvement, Indigeneity, English as a second language, school size, funding, and socio-economic factors. However, scholars such as Hughes and Hughes (2012) using NAPLAN data systematically dismiss each of these reasons. Alternatively, there is an equally extensive body of literature which cites factors of, for example, the deficit construction of Aboriginal students (Beresford, 2003; Harrison, 2007); cultural mismatch or disconnect between the Eurocentric school culture and the students home/community culture (Delpit, 1995; Malin, 1990); or that Australia's teacher profile continues to be dominated by non-Aboriginal, middle class, European-background educators (Perso, 2012). In our respective research projects we argue that the latter are far more productive reasons. Rigney (2002) poignantly notes:

> The status quo is no longer acceptable. Nor is the spectacle of Indigenous failure. No longer is it justified for the magnifying glass in the sun to be focused on the so-called 'Aboriginal deficit'. Rather, robust analysis and critique of educational systems, structures, and jurisdiction must be interrogated for their role in inequality.

There are a growing number of educational strategies and approaches across Australia that place Aboriginal culture and identity at the centre of learning. For example, there is the Aboriginal Girls Circle at Dubbo High School (Dobia, 2014), the 'eight-ways framework' (Yunkaporta & Kirby 2012), and Osborne's (2003) nine signposts for teacher engagement. Such approaches strongly affirm the cultural identity of each child and their community and consistently demonstrate positive outcomes for those involved.

Our respective research projects are driven by a deep desire to 'hurry up' the process of improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and their families. Our individual research undertakings take up the challenge from two related directions - cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy. Briefly, the link between cultural competence and responsiveness is that the latter is the delivered outcome of cultural competence. That is, an individual or organisation needs to possess cultural competence to be able to enact or respond. Perso (2012:21) advocates "Cultural Responsiveness is enacted Cultural Competence". With this in mind we start with cultural competence and then move into culturally responsive pedagogy.

Cultural Competence

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) guides educators to reinforce and reflect in their daily practice the principles laid out in the Convention. It states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities and languages. Cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural differences. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) which is an early childhood curriculum framework, which guides early childhood educators in developing quality, early childhood education programs for all children from birth to 5 years of age. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2010:16) describes cultural competence as:

- being aware of one's own world view
- developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences
- gaining knowledge of cultural practices and world views

- developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures

Petty (2010:15) defines cultural competence as 'A set of values and principles, demonstrated behaviours, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable people to work effectively in cross-cultural settings'. Similarly, Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaacs (1989:189) define cultural competence as:

> ...a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Building educators' cultural competence in relating to Aboriginal children and families is a process that is underpinned by relationships and evolves over time. Fitzgerald (2000:184) affirms that at the individual level, cultural competence may be regarded as:

> …the ability to identify and challenge one's cultural assumptions, one's values and beliefs. It is about developing empathy and connected knowledge, the ability to see the world through another's eyes, or, at the very least to recognise that others may view the world through different cultural lenses.

Therefore, in the quest for cultural competence, it is imperative for educators to examine their personal perspectives, understandings and attitudes, and knowledge and skills. These three components of cultural competence are interactive and none is sufficient in and of itself to bring about appropriate practice (Perso, 2012:19). Professional and personal accountability requires individuals to be prepared to

undertake a journey of self-reflection and critique. If attitudes and preconceived perceptions impact on pedagogy, then one must reflect on these attributes, and how one's personal history and experiences has informed these. A culturally competent educator respects and values the unique cultural identity of each child.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

Ladson-Billings (1994:31) defines culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogy that recognises the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. Similarly, Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students". As such, culturally responsive pedagogy is not just one approach to teaching but a series of interlocking and complex elements guided by a set of principals or strategies gained through cultural competence discussed earlier.

For example, Alaska Native educators have developed a set of guidelines against which schools and communities can examine what they are doing to attend to the cultural well-being of the young people they are responsible for nurturing to adulthood (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998:2). The standards cover five overarching areas including those for students, educators, curriculum, schools, and communities. Likewise, New Zealand's Te Kotahitanga program is a comprehensive approach that challenges beliefs held of school leaders and teachers informing future practice (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Teddy, 2007).

As my research primarily focuses on what constitutes successful teaching of Aboriginal students let me share my understanding of CRP according to both the literature reviewed so far and the observations undertaken. In short, culturally responsive pedagogy in all its guises is the antithesis of the assimilationist models of education borne out of two centuries of colonialism. A culturally responsive pedagogue is critically reflective, recognises, analyses and rejects deficit perceptions of students, values a cultural frame of reference and students prior learning, are agents of change, shares power in the classroom and, builds relationships with students, parents and community (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998; Au, 2009; Castagno and Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lewthwaite, McMillan and Renaud, 2013). It is an approach to education that challenges long held beliefs of assimilation that have served to marginalise and disempower Aboriginal students.

At the outset of this move on our shared research passion we noted that CRP is the enactment of Cultural Competence (Perso, 2012). We argue that they are two inter-locked approaches to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Central to our individual rationales for focusing on the pedagogy is the growing body of literature that demonstrates the significance of quality, or successful teaching to which we will now turn.

Quality teaching

There is an extensive body of scholarly literature which stress the significant role that quality teachers play in educational success for Aboriginal students. To start with, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report *Teachers*

Matter points out "… Improving the efficiency and equity of schooling depends, in large measure, on ensuring that competent people want to work as teachers, that their teaching is of high quality, and that all students have access to high quality teaching". Likewise, investigating Aboriginal peoples' perceptions and beliefs about quality teaching, Burgess and Berwick (2009) reported that Aboriginal students, families, community members and many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working in schools singled out the work of teachers as the 'make or break element' contributing to Aboriginal student success. Similarly, McDonald (2003) found that improved levels of Aboriginal student engagement and learning success can be credited to exemplary classroom teaching practices. Additionally Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers through the *Dare to Lead* Collegial Snapshot Process identified six key variables that make an effective school for their child which included the Cultural Environment and Quality of Teachers (Milgate and Giles-Brown, 2013).

The significance of focusing on quality teaching is reinforced in both the South Australian Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) Aboriginal Strategy 2013-16 and, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2010-2014. A key domain emphasised by both is a focus on Building Effective Leadership and Quality Teaching. In particular, this domain directly impacts on the success of all other domains within the DECD strategy - Readiness for School, Engagement and Connections, Attendance, Literacy and Numeracy, Pathways to real post school options, and Employment of Aboriginal people in teaching.

Final comments

To return to the argument presented at the beginning of this paper we reiterate that improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students is complex but at the very least measures need to place culture at the centre of thinking. That culture is the "more" that Tom Calma argues for. While the Closing the Gap measures are worthwhile fighting for, culturally competent and responsive pedagogy are potential ways in which Aboriginal students and their families can view education as desirable and indispensible in their lives as is the intended purpose of education. They are inter-locked approaches which ultimately strive to enable Aboriginal students to grow into participating members of both mainstream society and, at least equally contribute to the well-being of their own community.

While this research is ongoing, this paper is based on the preliminary findings of our research. The past decade has seen record enrolments of Aboriginal students at both primary and secondary levels (Klenowski, 2009) with a further 200,000 more Aboriginal students expected to enter the Australian educational system by 2020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). We need more than attendance records if we are going to meet this challenge. With a focus on cultural competence and responsiveness our research projects have the potential to inform pre-service teacher training and, professional development of existing staff. By doing so, we foresee systemic change that places culture at the centre of learning thereby bringing about sustainable educational improvements that will contribute to closing the gap far more effectively than mere attendance rates.

Word count: 3,194

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