

# Chapter 8

## Culturally Responsive Relationships Focused Pedagogies: The Key to Quality Teaching and Creating Quality Learning Environments

**Catherine Maree Burgess**

*University of Sydney, Australia*

**John Robert Evans**

*University of Technology Sydney, Australia*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines the importance of culturally responsive relationships-focused pedagogical approaches in engaging Aboriginal students in their learning and the significance of this to improving their educational outcomes. Significantly, the themes and issues raised in this chapter reflect much of the international literature on Indigenous, minority and marginalised students. The following enablers are necessary when implementing culturally responsive relationships focused pedagogies: Engaging with Aboriginal families and community members; Harnessing Aboriginal students' backgrounds, lived experiences and interests as classroom resources; Implementing innovative place-based curriculum approaches, and Exploring holistic teacher professional learning opportunities. The combination of these factors creates quality learning environments as places of belonging and socio-cultural support underpinned by mobilising Aboriginal family and community social and cultural capital in the educational process. Once schools and teachers realise the potential of this approach, conditions are created to improve the academic, social and cultural outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the importance of culturally responsive relationships focussed pedagogical approaches to engaging Australia's most educationally disadvantaged students; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. While this chapter reflects the Australian context, the discussion and approaches outlined here will find traction in any context where an Indigenous and /or 'Other' minority struggles to find relevance and social justice in a western society that only superficially acknowledges their socio-cultural and political relevance to national identity.

The initial exclusion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from Australian education systems, followed by assimilationist approaches to their inclusion, has resulted in poor educational outcomes. Statistics indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes in literacy, numeracy, attendance, Year 12 completion and post-school educational attainment are still well below non-Indigenous Australians and that while there have been modest achievements in some areas, the gap remains (see Mahuteau, Karmel, Kostas, & Zhu, 2015; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014). This current context emerges from the establishment of state education systems in Australia during widespread public acceptance of social evolution theories that placed non-whites as inferior to westerners and Indigenous peoples below non-whites. Consequently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were considered uneducable, placed in missions and reserves designed to obliterate cultural practices and eventually, the people themselves (Parbury, 1986; Tatz, 1999). Nearly two centuries of institutional and racist violence and consequent Aboriginal marginalisation has resulted in cycles of poverty and discrimination creating highly complex multiple disadvantage contexts that governments are reticent and often incapable of addressing other than through deficit approaches to policy and practices that inadvertently 'blame the victim'. As Lowe and Yunkaporta (2013, p. 9) note;

*power (is) vested in the state to ensure that national cultural and historical discourses supportive of its histories and aspirations are entrenched as core content in state or national curriculum. These discourses normalize agreed national 'realities' by embedding privileged 'canonical' knowledge in ways that provide teachers with little opportunity to develop teaching which challenges its nature, form, context or bias.*

This situation is aggravated by the reality that, "the teaching population is overwhelmingly Anglo-Australian (and) the majority of teacher education students at Australian universities have attended white, middle-class Anglo-Australian schools" (Santoro & Allard, 2005, p. 864) and so the diverse student population is not reflected in the teaching service. Significant local and national research identifies teacher quality as the one of most important factors, as Darling-Hammond, LaFors and Snyder (2001) note, "influencing student achievement ahead of class size, school size ... (and) ... a larger share of the variance in students' achievement than any other single factor, including poverty, race and parent education" (p. 10). With this in mind, this chapter explores what teacher quality might look like in Aboriginal contexts when culturally responsive relationships focussed pedagogical approaches are applied. When collaborating with Aboriginal students, families and their communities occurs, innovative approaches are applied to curriculum and holistic teacher professional learning opportunities are centralised within local school contexts and cultures, and space for new and empowering approaches to Aboriginal education emerges.

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