



Development of an instrument to measure a facet of quality teaching: Culturally responsive pedagogy



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of Phase 2 of a larger three phase study examining culturally responsive pedagogies and their influence on Indigenous student outcomes. Characteristics of culturally responsive pedagogies obtained through interviews with Australian Indigenous¹ parents and students generated characteristics and themes which were distilled into survey items. The resulting instrument was applied to practicing teachers for validation.

The survey was piloted on a sample of 141 elementary and secondary teachers from diverse schools. Analyses using Item Response Theory, employing the Rasch model, confirmed that the instrument measured a unidimensional latent trait, culturally responsive pedagogy. Seven subscales, initially qualitatively determined, were statistically confirmed. The instrument proved suitable to measure nuances in pedagogy and to detect significant differences between elementary and secondary teachers.

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1. Introduction

It has been proposed that Indigenous pedagogy, properly analysed and explored on the basis of Indigenous values and philosophies has great potential to lead to positive educational change for all learners (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Lewthwaite, Owen, Doiron, Renaud, & McMillan, 2014; Yunkaporta and McGinty, 2009). Pedagogical practise that has been recognised as being relevant for Indigenous Australians is founded on broad principles of identity and relatedness, and nourished by values of reciprocity, inclusiveness, nurturance and respect (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008). Notions such as defining identity through relatedness to people, place, space, (history, present and future), acknowledgement of unique identities, experiences and perspectives, caring, sharing experience and knowing, patience and respect are fundamental matters often espoused for the pedagogical practices deemed to be in line with Indigenous Australians' ideologies and values (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Yunkaporta and McGinty, 2009).

These views are congruent with heightened concerns about educational quality internationally and in Australia. Yet although Australia has been deemed to deliver high quality education, recent international evaluations conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2006; Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, & Buckley, 2010) suggest that Australia is a low equity-high quality education performer and provider (McGaw, 2006). That is, there is evidence of inequity in school outcomes with large achievement gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The

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latest results show Indigenous Australian students are performing on average at a standard equivalent to 2.5 years behind non-Indigenous students. As a result, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) that is, all state, territorial and national governments in Australia, agreed to a set of educational priorities and reform directions to reduce Indigenous disadvantage (2009). These include a drive to ensure schools and teachers build upon local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning, endorsing well established Vygotskian theoretical precepts.

2. Theoretical underpinning

A lack of congruence between the culture of the school and that of the student is well associated with Indigenous students' limited success in school. For example, low engagement in Indigenous American students in the absence of culturally responsive practices (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). In New Zealand, low expectations and student alienation are linked to high suspension rates, over-representation in special education, low educational attainment, and low retention rates for Maori students (Ministry of Education, 2006). As expressed by Stairs (1995) two decades ago, Indigenous students' lack of educational success in northern Canadian schools can be attributed to the inability of schools to meet the learning needs of their Indigenous citizens through the experiences and pedagogies offered in classrooms. She asserted that this failure includes not only resource and language materials appropriate for each context, but also, more importantly, the culturally located pedagogy that moves beyond the *what* of classrooms to the *how* of classrooms (Lewthwaite et al., 2014). Stairs' comments resonate with the discourse on effective teaching within North Queensland where this study is located.

Many voices have more recently advocated for improved teaching pedagogy to raise educational outcomes for students in general, and Indigenous students in particular (Hattie, 2009; Pearson, 2011; Rowe, 2006; Sarra, 2011). For example, Hattie's (2003, 2009) meta-analysis of 800 studies examining the impact of a range of variables on educational achievement, identified teachers and their pedagogy as a major source of variance in students' achievement. Hattie (2003) recommended that there should be a focus on the specific actions of teachers that influence student learning outcomes, challenging teachers to 'know thy student' and reflect upon the consequence of their teaching upon learning. He stressed that teachers must engage in dialogue with their students about their teaching and students' learning thereby making learning visible Hattie (2009).

Such propositions embedded in an overarching professionalism also imply a strong ethic of care for one's students (Boon, 2011), including caring for students as culturally located individuals within the context of positive student–teacher relationships. Gore, Ladwig, Griffiths and Amosa (2007) argued that it was the approach with which teachers tackled their professional duties that made a difference. An approach based on commitment to their students' learning, underscored by a commitment to social justice which springs from an internalised value system. They argued that teachers' values and beliefs determine teacher quality. A professional ethic of care is central to understanding, appreciating and including a student's cultural background in any pedagogical practice, reflecting culturally responsive pedagogy. Such caring for students as culturally located individuals has implications for teacher pedagogy, that is, how teachers support student learning.

Culturally responsive pedagogy was central to Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky (1978) stressed the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, as he believed strongly that community played a central role in the process of "making meaning." As early as the 1930s his theory advocated for the use of cultural tools for the facilitation of learning. These ideas and propositions are intrinsically linked to cultural identity and, as emphasised in Indigenous culture, in collaborative learning wherein the teacher or more knowledgeable other is a facilitator of the learning process. More recently Gay (2010) defined it as teaching 'to and through [students'] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments' (p. 26) and as premised on 'close interactions among ethnic identity, cultural background, and student achievement' (p. 27). In 2012, the unassumingly released Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) by the Menzies Institute (Perso, 2012) argued for informed improvement in teacher effectiveness for Indigenous students in Australia. Like Hattie's work (2009), it compiles a range of effective teaching practices gathered from decades of national study that the author, Thelma Perso, asserts must be considered in making learning more effective for Indigenous students. Critically, many of the identified practices in this document, such as teacher clarity, explicit instruction and provision of feedback to students correspond with the assertions made by Hattie (2009) and Rowe (2006). However, Hattie's assumption of a uniform application of such practices for all students overlooks the potential power of influence of the context- and culture-bound nature of learners and learning (Perso, 2012; Snook, O'Neill, Clark, O'Neill, & Openshaw, 2009).

Despite the often quoted characteristics of CRP and the plethora of untested 'good ideas' in the Australian literature (Authors, under review), no systematic and empirically-based research provides any conclusive indication of 'what works' in influencing Indigenous students' learning (Price and Hughes, 2009). The Menzies Institute (2012) document, recalling Castagno and Brayboy's (2008) international challenge, calls for governments to support empirically-based research to verify whether the identified culturally located pedagogy is instrumental to Indigenous students' achievement. Considering Hattie's imperative to make learning visible by opening the dialogue between students and teachers, there is a dearth of research that responds to what Australian Indigenous students and their communities are saying about pedagogy which influences their learning. As Rowe (2003, p. 22) laments, "there is a growing uneasiness [in Australian education] related to how little is known about teacher quality from Indigenous students' own perspectives". Craven, Bodkin-Andrews, & Yeung (2007, p. 4) also stressed: "there is astoundingly little known about what Aboriginal students see as the qualities of effective teachers and the impact this has on educational outcomes". There is a need to validate the application of Hattie's findings to Aboriginal students; to tease out facets of quality teaching that are salient to Aboriginal students; examine what Indigenous

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