

## Research Article

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# Negotiating the pedagogical requirements of both explicit instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy in Far North Queensland: teaching explicitly, responding responsively

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## Abstract

This article documents a teaching journey in a 6/7 class with 20 Torres Strait Islander students in the curriculum area of literacy, over the course of one academic year. Specifically, this action research study explores a classroom teacher's efforts to navigate and respond to the prominent teaching model of explicit instruction and culturally responsive teaching, both of which inform policy statements in Far North Queensland. Using a reflective journal, teacher observations, informal student dialogue sessions, yarning circles and student work samples, the first author (D'Aiitti) endeavoured to adjust her teaching practice to determine how best to meet her learners' needs. Through on-going critical reflection, engagement with two critical friends and in consultation with a cultural mentorship group, her teaching underwent transformation. One of the key findings of this study was that students want to learn, and for this to occur, teachers must independently navigate the curriculum documents, and in doing so, the explicit instruction model must be re-aligned, re-adjusted and re-positioned to suit Torres Strait Islander student needs.

## Introduction

This action research study documented a classroom teacher's journey (D'Aiitti) in Far North Queensland, where a large majority of the population, outside of Cairns, is largely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Caniglia *et al.*, 2010). As reported by the Department of Education and Training, this region has the highest percentage of Indigenous students in attendance (DET, 2016). To improve the academic standards of Indigenous learners in the area, there has been, in the past decade, an overriding emphasis on teaching quality. This emphasis on teaching improvement is usually represented by the term 'effective teaching' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000) (MCEETYA, 2000).

However, that which constitutes effective teaching has not only been widely argued in the literature, but has also been vehemently contested in Australian education, particularly in the Far North Queensland context (Pearson, 2011; Rahman, 2013). Some educators describe effective teaching in terms of teacher attributes, especially teacher behaviours and actions identified statistically as influencing student learning and achievement (Polk, 2006; Hattie, 2012). Hattie's (2012) comments on effective teachers and teaching practice are extended to identify the need for practitioners to make the learning visible, by engaging with their students to determine which practices influence student achievement. Through the many actions that are indicative of effective teaching, effective teachers primarily make an impact in the classroom by improving student outcomes.

Although Hattie's (2012) assertions are frequently cited in Far North Queensland disseminated materials, effective teaching is also referenced beyond the specific practices of teachers and is also referred to in terms of the actual teaching model adopted. In Far North Queensland, three pedagogical models are commonly mentioned in association with effective teaching: constructivist approach, direct instruction approaches and culturally responsive teaching. For teachers working within the discipline of science, this means implementing a constructivist approach to learning (Sanaa, 2006; Lida *et al.*, 2012). Through this student-centred approach, learners actively construct their own meaning as they undergo new experiences, with the facilitation of a teacher. Other educators, especially those who specialise in literacy and numeracy, strongly maintain that a direct teaching approach, such as explicit instruction (Pearson, 2011; Fleming and Kleinhertz, 2013) or direct instruction, is more effective (Rosenshine, 2012). In such pedagogical approaches, the learning is broken down into small steps and ample teacher guidance is provided (Archer and Hughes, 2011).

Finally, there are those who are concerned with the socio-political context of the learner. Such educators claim that teaching must be responsive, and practitioners need to be mindful of their

learners' cultures, backgrounds and prior experiences. These aspects must be embraced and deeply embedded into the learning sequence. More significantly, such aspects should underpin a teacher's thinking (Gay, 2010; Lewthwaite *et al.*, 2014). Teaching in this manner is known as culturally responsive teaching (Osborne, 2001) or culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010). In short, being a culturally responsive practitioner is about being mindful of students' contextual backgrounds, especially as culturally located learners, and using this as a critical lens in promoting learning and improving student outcomes (Lewthwaite *et al.*, 2013).

## Background and context

Despite the movement towards culturally responsive pedagogy in Far North Queensland, many schools experience an excessive and solely academic orientation to learning. That is, through the mandate of teaching explicitly, teachers are facing immense pressure to focus entirely on student achievement, particularly in the disciplines of literacy and numeracy. This intense focus on assessment and student results is occurring at the expense of culturally located practices, which have become more of a superficial gesture than an embedded characteristic of learning. Indeed, it has been acknowledged that, little in the Far North Queensland educational system has been achieved in embedding culturally responsive practices, and much more ought to be done to reflect the values of students and their respective communities (Lewthwaite *et al.*, 2013; Rahman, 2013).

Given this intense focus on academic achievement, how should teachers adjust their practice? That is, how can teachers adhere to the mandate of teaching explicitly, and yet responsively, as is paradoxically required (DET, 2011; Perso, 2012). Given these imperatives, conflicts arise, and it is precisely these conflicts that became the foci of this study. The dilemma which D'Aiitti faced in her 6/7 class was how to implement the explicit instruction model, whilst still adhering to the principles advocated for in a culturally responsive approach. Could both approaches be used harmoniously or did adaptations need to occur? As a teacher, D'Aiitti did not want to passively accept these mandates, but instead, chose to problematise her teaching and seek resolution through scrutiny of her own practice, as several scholars have suggested (Berry, 2007; Sellars, 2014). That is, she chose to navigate the dominant and competing discourses of explicit instruction and culturally responsive teaching in the Torres Strait educational landscape.

This study focused on her teaching journey on a remote Torres Strait Island. Specifically, the study focused on the skills of speaking and writing, as requested by students, using the mandated English units entitled Language for Learning (L4L) and Big Write (Andrell Education, 2017). Throughout the study, D'Aiitti explored the tensioned space (Berry, 2007) between explicit instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy, and the unease she experienced in her teaching. The first author challenged the explicit instruction model, which she believed was being enforced with a disregard for her learners' cultural backgrounds and linguistic needs. Similar to Nakata (2011) and Osborne (2001), D'Aiitti challenged the intense focus on improving students' outcomes, which she maintained was occurring at the expense of their rich cultural heritage.

## Explicit instruction

At the time of this study, the main teaching pedagogy, within the strands of numeracy and literacy, being used throughout the Far

North Queensland region, was explicit instruction, based on the Fleming (2014, 2015) model of 'I do, We do, You do'. This pedagogical approach focuses on academic achievement (Archer and Hughes, 2011). It is sequenced, fast paced and with clear learning objectives. Furthermore, the teacher controls the learning, which is also highly scaffolded (teacher support which is gradually removed as students comprehend the new concept to be learned) (Fleming and Kleinhenz, 2013; Fleming, 2014, 2015). Experts of this teaching style argue that the learning is manageable precisely because the content is broken down into small chunks and ample practice is provided (Archer and Hughes, 2011). Teachers use significant examples, modelling, checking for understanding (by asking learners questions) and the think aloud strategy (this is when the teacher reveals their thoughts and subsequent actions by directly speaking out loud the teaching steps as they go through the teaching process) throughout their teaching.

In the 'I do' section, the teacher introduces and explains, in depth, the content or concepts to be learned (Fleming, 2014, 2015). Typically, during this time, there is limited interaction between the students and the teacher, as the teacher breaks down the learning using the think aloud process to do so. In the 'We do' part of the model, interaction between the learners and the teacher increases, as they work through guided examples together. This is done with the expectation that by the end of this section, students are starting to work independently (Hollingsworth and Ybarra, 2009). In the 'You do' section, students work independently on an assigned task. During this time, the teacher should continue to monitor, checking answers to further facilitate the learning. The learning concludes with the 'Plough Back', which is a questioning strategy used to determine if learners have understood the necessary content (Archer and Hughes, 2011).

## Policy

So how did this particular teaching pedagogy, which focuses on academic achievement with limited regard for students' rich, cultural backgrounds, become so prominent in the Torres Strait region? To understand the emphasis on explicit instruction, it is necessary to have some understanding of Australia's current educational policies. The Neo-liberal paradigm has been thought to direct the thinking of state leaders, whose educational policies have been driven by an industrial model of teaching (Sleeter, 2012). Using this model, the teaching profession has been restricted to a myopic focus on increasing student performance in standardised testing such as the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) and the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), forcing, as Mills and McGregor exhort (2014), students to comply with the system or fail. In Australia, current education policies are still strongly influenced by the Quality Education Policy (Rudd and Gillard, 2008), which has a strong focus on student outcomes. In such a system, it could be argued that parents and students become investors and outputs in a competitive market. As Ball (2005) asserts, 'Policy is something "done" to people. Policies pose problems. Policy creates circumstances by which recipients are either advantaged or disadvantaged. We "people" policy' (p. 21). As such, it could be said that explicit instruction has gained its popularity as a silver bullet to solve the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (MCEETYA, 2000).

## Contention

Needless to say, such direct teaching methods have come under scrutiny in the literature, especially by those who advocate for a learning style that is more holistic and grounded in the social realities of students' lives (Lewthwaite and McMillan, 2010; Rychly and Graves, 2012). Such advocates maintain that teaching and learning are culturally located and that the backgrounds, prior learning experiences and students' cultures ought to be considered and utilised, in order to maximise learning. When this does not occur, learning at school conflicts with that which is learnt in the home and in the community. This socially constructed view of learning (Rahman, 2013; Lewthwaite *et al.*, 2014) is what the first author sought to achieve in her own classroom. As Mills and McGregor (2014) contend, teachers must seek resolution of the data-driven agenda placed on them by policy makers at a school, local and national level, and it is precisely this viewpoint that D'Aiatti chose to challenge.

This study sought to determine how teaching practices, such as explicit instruction and culturally responsive teaching, could be implemented in the classroom, and to evaluate how they could meet the needs of Torres Strait Islander students, who speak English as a second language or dialect (EAL/D). Confronted with the reality that direct teaching models are mandated throughout Far North Queensland, and given the lack of prior research (Chigeza, 2010), the first author believed it was appropriate for this study to be conducted. Did Indigenous students in the Torres Strait want their learning to be broken down, or perhaps they wished to learn more holistically (Barnes, 2000; Perso, 2012)? Did Torres Strait Islander students feel embarrassed by explicit instruction's spotlighting, as perhaps Osborne (2001) suggests? Did Islander students appreciate their work being displayed in the classroom, as is the explicit instruction norm (Fleming and Kleinhenz, 2013)? Moreover, at the time of D'Aiatti's tenure in the Torres Strait, there had been very few studies in Australia, and indeed none in the Torres Strait, that specifically captured the students' viewpoints about practices to support their learning. Nakata (2001) claims that, if minority and marginalised students and their communities are no longer to be silenced, practitioners need to respond. The status quo of what is dominating our current educational context, resulting in a fracture between home and schooling, needs to be challenged (Rahman, 2013). A one-size-fits-all teaching approach, as an acceptable and equitable means to education, must be investigated. In our current multicultural and global climate, teachers need to respond to their students with an inquiring mindset, and the roots of their response must unquestionably begin with identifying the learning needs of students as individuals, not as mere commodities, or numbers to serve the educational hierarchies, who seek to push their own agenda (Mills and McGregor, 2014). It is with this challenged mindset that D'Aiatti embarked upon her journey of responsiveness.

## Theoretical framework

This study was carried out using a transformative, critical paradigm. It was transformative in that the first author hoped to bring about reform in her classroom, by questioning the political nature of the current educational system in Australia, particularly in Far North Queensland. A critical pedagogy paradigm underpinned this research. Such a paradigm promotes emancipatory action and above all, it embraces change (Giroux, 2010). The

fundamental foundations of education in the Torres Strait are those which have been imposed upon Islanders since the arrival of the Europeans and missionaries, as Nakata (2001) personally experienced. This study was D'Aiatti's critical response to the Torres Strait situation. Driven by a critical pedagogic mindset, D'Aiatti challenged the Rudd Quality Education Policy (Rudd and Gillard, 2008), with its attitude towards students as human capital, claiming that the needs of her Islander students were not being sufficiently met. Torres Strait Islanders have, in the past, and continue to be marginalised and severely disadvantaged by the present educational system dominating Queensland, which, as Nakata (2001, 2011) stipulates, is based on white, middle-class values.

This was a qualitative study. Lichtman (2013) describes such an approach as being based on the researcher's own experience, background and knowledge. Central to this study was the decision to draw upon the first author's teaching experience, her professional knowledge and personal background, to provide in-depth insights into her teaching, and the choices she made in her practice. Furthermore, in conducting a qualitative style of research, the researcher seeks to understand the human perspective (Castellan, 2010). Throughout her journey, D'Aiatti wanted to gain a clearer understanding of her students and their learning experience, and the way in which she could impact more positively on that experience.

## Methodology

This study sought to investigate three research questions, one of which is discussed herewith:

What are the guiding principles and practices that effective teachers can adopt in their classrooms which will best meet the needs of their Torres Strait Islander students?

This was an action research study. Carr and Kemmis (1986) view action research as a reflective and critical enquiry, which enables teachers to analyse their practice, with a view to improving it. Through adopting this viewpoint, D'Aiatti was able to view her explicit instruction teaching from a more critical standpoint. Rather than passively accept imposed mandates, D'Aiatti chose, as others too have chosen (Lewthwaite and McMillan, 2010), to problematise her teaching, so that she could teach in a manner consistent with her students' beliefs and values. Further, one of the goals of action research is to initiate change (Lacey, 2006). It empowers the researcher to question and critique. Throughout this study, D'Aiatti learned to both question and critique, not merely what she was teaching, but, as Lewthwaite and McMillan (2010) advise, also 'how' and 'why' she was teaching. Her work became a sincere commitment to and in collaboration with her students. As a result of this process, D'Aiatti could provide a rationale for the actions she took in the classroom and the decisions she made.

## Cycles of enquiry

This research study comprised four research cycles. Cycle one was an initial inquiry stage to determine what the students thought of D'Aiatti's explicit teaching and what was of concern to them. In this cycle, D'Aiatti began by using a reflective journal and liaising with her two critical friends, as she reflected on her teaching in her classroom and the challenges she faced. She then engaged in dialogue with her students and asked them to identify the

concerns they held about her teaching. Five concerns, referred to as key elements throughout the study, were identified and subsequently written as 'I will' statements. For example, the first key element was 'I will help you learn by adjusting the explicit instruction model to meet your English needs'.

Cycle two was an exploration of each of the students' five identified concerns to determine, more precisely, how D'Aiatti could adjust her practice to meet her students' needs more responsively. For instance, in this cycle, D'Aiatti directly asked her students how they wanted her to adjust the explicit instruction model to meet their English needs (key element 1). They responded with 'You need to adjust all parts of the explicit teaching model, but especially the pace and breaking it down. We want more time in the "You do" section. You need to provide more consistent feedback'.

Cycle three, the interrogation and enactment phase, comprised multiple stages of action, in which D'Aiatti adjusted her practice to be more responsive, responding to her students' needs. By the end of this cycle, D'Aiatti's students informed her that she had adjusted her explicit teaching sufficiently to meet their needs in the curriculum of English, focusing specifically on writing and speaking skills, as her students had requested. Despite the students feeling that D'Aiatti had adjusted her teaching enough to enable them to experience success in English, in the final cycle, the partial resolution of practice, from a personal perspective, D'Aiatti experienced complete turmoil. As she engaged in dialogue with the Head of Campus, after a routine teaching observation, D'Aiatti realised that what was of focus to the Education Department was how she taught explicitly, with little regard to the responsive practices, which she had strived to embed in her 6/7 class. Although the Head of Campus was fully aware of the adjustments which she had made in her personal journey to become a more responsive practitioner, the observation itself, as mandated by the Department, focused solely on the explicit instruction model (the observation checklist was entitled 'Explicit Teaching Formal Lesson Observation and Feedback').

## Participants

This research took place over an academic school year. The setting was a 6/7 class, comprising 20 Torres Strait Islander students between the ages of 11 and 13. Twelve students were female and eight were male. All the students identified as speaking Creole at home, with over half stating that they also spoke the traditional island language.

## Data collection techniques

The data sources, which D'Aiatti used throughout the cycles, comprised: teacher observations of her own teaching, a reflective journal, student dialogue sessions, yarning circles and student work samples of writing in English. In assisting the first author on her learning journey, she sought the assistance of two critical friends, the former being the Head of Campus and the latter being an experienced senior teacher. In addition, the first author held frequent discussions with her cultural mentorship group, which comprised two community members who worked in administration roles within the school. Through her reflective journal, she was able to affirm her own self-identity as a teacher through the deliberate and purposeful documentation of her practice (Wiseman *et al.*, 2005). The student dialogue sessions and yarning circles comprised of talking with students and asking them questions about her teaching and their learning (responses were

collated in paper format and students were required to either use a tick or cross, or a yes or no, or provide a short written response). In this manner, students had a platform to openly discuss D'Aiatti's pedagogy and the curriculum. To support the student dialogue sessions, D'Aiatti also engaged in yarning circles (Queensland Studies Authority, 2010).

## Data analysis

For the data analysis, D'Aiatti used Lichtman's (2013) three Cs analysis of coding, categorising and concepts, as presented.

## Journals

In each journal entry, D'Aiatti analysed paragraphs of texts which were subsequently coded using one or two words. Each code represented a main thread of the ideas she had chosen to consider for reflection. These codes were transformed into categories such as adjustment, success and concern. These reflections were used as further consideration for adjustment of D'Aiatti's practice in meeting her learners' needs, based on their responses in the student conversations.

## Observations

Two observations were used – one in the first term and one in term four. Given the structured mandated nature of the observations, which were based on the explicit instruction model, D'Aiatti was able to code and partition the data into two categories – positive feedback (PF) and discussion (D). The key concepts which emerged from these two categories were the specific comments made by her first critical friend pertaining to her strengths and weaknesses as an explicit instruction practitioner. This feedback, alongside the feedback provided by students, was used as crucial evidence to adjust D'Aiatti's teaching to align more closely with her learners' needs, in teaching explicitly, yet responsively.

Student conversations (dialogues and yarning circles) were used throughout the study. In term one, D'Aiatti asked her students to relate their concerns about her teaching. Five concerns, within the curriculum of English, specifically writing and oral skills, were identified and subsequently written as five 'I will' statements. These concerns enabled D'Aiatti to address specific elements of her teaching, as she progressed through each of the four action research cycles.

## Writing samples

The work samples provided were analysed at the sentence level, using codes to identify common errors, which represented a specific category within writing (e.g. SP = spelling, O = openers). The patterns (concepts) which emerged from analysing students' writing samples provided D'Aiatti with crucial evidence on how to further adjust her explicit instruction teaching, in order to improve her students' writing in the subsequent cycles.

An overview of the data collection tools pertinent to the research question herewith is presented in Table 1, and the data analysis overview is presented in Table 2.

## Ethical considerations

In conducting this study, D'Aiatti endeavoured to adhere to the five principles of ethical research: reciprocity, respect, equality,



**Table 1.** Data collection

Research question	What data?	How to collect data?
What are the guiding principles and practices that effective teachers can adopt in their classrooms which will best meet the needs of Torres Strait Islander students?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Student feedback</li> <li>2. Effective teaching strategies</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Journal reflections</li> <li>2. Student dialogue sessions and yarning circles</li> <li>3. Teacher observations</li> <li>4. Student work samples</li> </ol>

responsibility and survival and protection. D'Aiitti hoped to have demonstrated reciprocity, mutual exchange, by purposefully taking action to improve her teaching to benefit her students' learning, whilst still maintaining to preserve their culture. D'Aiitti showed respect to her students and their communities by truly listening to what they had to say, in the student dialogue sessions, and then acting upon those responses. This view was central to the study. She upheld a sense of equality by valuing her students' viewpoints, through the student dialogue sessions, and by not imposing her personal views on them. D'Aiitti made a conscious effort to engage her students in mutual, sharing of ideas and opinions, by encouraging her learners to openly talk with their peers in the dialogue sessions. To support her students further, an Indigenous teacher aid was always present to help the students in the dialogue sessions, whenever they needed further clarification or had a question. D'Aiitti demonstrated responsibility by making sure the research was transparent and would in no way harm the participants. For this reason, the research took place in school time and always in the presence of an indigenous teacher aid. Finally, in adhering to the principle of survival and protection, D'Aiitti did not in any way discriminate against the learners. The research was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any given time. She endeavoured to listen to the students' voices to make the learning visible and to respond to her learners' needs.

## Findings

This study revealed that in meeting the needs of Islander students, there are guiding principles and practices which must underpin a teacher's thinking in order to ensure the success of their learners.

### Finding 1

The first finding showed, as has often been identified in the literature on responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2010; Taylor and Sobel, 2011), that there are guiding principles which ought to underpin a practitioner's mindset when teaching indigenous students. Foremost, teachers must be willing to place their own needs second to those of the students they serve. In order to reduce the inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes, teachers must respect and nurture students' values and those of their respective communities. That is, teachers must listen to their students, as did D'Aiitti in the student dialogues, and adapt their practice accordingly, rather than simply follow the explicit instruction model rigidly, as D'Aiitti initially did and failed.

**Table 2.** Data analysis

Stage	Procedure
1	Using Lichtman's (2013) 3Cs coding, category and concept analysis, D'Aiitti analysed teacher journal reflections at the paragraph level to identify her key concerns. Many of the concerns identified, as is evidenced in the four research cycles, supported the data which emerged from engaging with students in conversation, who, she discovered, held similar concerns to her own.
2	Using Lichtman's (2013) 3Cs analysis, feedback from the Head of Campus the teacher observations was coded and categorised into positive feedback and discussion for improvement of practice. From this feedback, D'Aiitti was able to identify specific elements of her teaching that required adjustment to meet learners' needs.
3	As D'Aiitti engaged in informal discussions with students, using Lichtman's (2013) 3Cs analysis, 5 key elements arose as being of most concern to students. In the four cycles, these concepts were analysed in further depth through further dialogue. New codes and categories were created as she began to explore the data and subsequently adjust the minutiae of her teaching.

### Finding 2

This study also revealed that educators must strive, where possible, to match school and home structures, acknowledging their learners' identities, as is widely advocated (Rahman, 2013; Lewthwaite *et al.*, 2014). This inevitably means that all learning must be contextualised, drawing on local resources, reaffirming, rather than negating community values (Taylor and Sobel, 2011; Lewthwaite *et al.*, 2013). For this reason, in consultation with her learners, D'Aiitti involved the community in the learning, with one of the most successful learning experiences, in the students' eyes, as revealed in the student conversations, being a whole school fundraiser event. This was planned, organised and run by the 6/7 class, embedding aspects of learning that they deemed relevant to ensure the success of the event.

### Finding 3

This research also found that practitioners must approach the present curriculum, which is currently based on white, middle-class values, with extreme caution, and strive to respect Islander ways of knowing and doing as Nakata (2001, 2011) and Osborne (2001) both propose. For example, as the student conversations revealed, it was necessary, at times, to replace the mandated content with more culturally appropriate materials. Students in this study were also given opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers, and to present orally, deviating from the explicit instruction norm of working independently, focusing mainly on written skills.

### Finding 4

This study also found that teachers can adopt specific practices in meeting Torres Strait Islander needs. Through the student dialogues and yarning circles, participants identified five key elements, concerning the explicit instruction model, which D'Aiitti addressed throughout the research cycles.

In addressing students' first concern (Key element 1: I will help you learn by adjusting the explicit instruction model to meet your

English needs), D'Aiatti did adapt her explicit teaching to suit the students' needs. For example, she refused to work at a brisk pace, allowing her students time to code-switch, as Perso (2012) recommends. D'Aiatti alternated between the 'I do' and 'We do' sections of the model, rather than following it sequentially, as is the explicit instruction norm. This served a twofold purpose. It enabled students to have more exposure to content, and to be exposed to the content in diverse ways, as Barnes (2000) suggests. In the 'You do' section, D'Aiatti purposely gave students more time to complete tasks, as well as allowing them to work cooperatively with their peers, disregarding the explicit instruction model of working independently. This provided students with opportunities to engage with their peers, discussing their learning in the process. In response to students' request to improve feedback, D'Aiatti purposely chose to be more explicit in the feedback she provided, as she walked around the classroom, monitoring. (This is feedback. Look at the word 'Brazil'. It is a country. This means it is a proper noun. What type of letter do proper nouns begin with?) Instead of concerning herself with time and the pressure to cover the mandated curriculum, which Hammond *et al.* (2015) acknowledge is a frequent teacher obsession, D'Aiatti also provided regular scheduled time allocations for every student to discuss and clarify individual feedback given, and she provided child-friendly rubrics, further considering her learners' EAL/D needs.

### Finding 5

It is essential that teachers do not disregard or underestimate students' linguistic needs, because as this study found, through the student conversations, students wanted to be recognised and treated as EAL/D learners (Key element 2: I will recognise that you are EAL/D learners by assisting you with oral, not just written English skills). As was frequently noted in the learners' responses, students are 'proud' of their cultural heritage. Effective, responsive teachers must adopt the practice of providing substantial support to improve students' English writing skills, but they should not do this at the expense of their oral skills. Rather, they provide opportunities to communicate in English, even if this means deviating from the curriculum (Aoki, 2012), and explicit instruction's focus on the written mode. Effective teachers ignore the policy of Standard Australian English only and engage in the practice of enabling students to converse in their first language (Osborne, 2001; Lewthwaite and McMillan, 2010), as a means of clarifying concepts and ideas in English. This practice ought to be embedded into the daily classroom routine, instead of the current trend of viewing students' use of Creole in a negative light (Osborne, 2001).

### Finding 6

Effective, responsive teachers do not engage in the practice of setting students up to fail, by forcing them to complete the mandated assessment tasks in isolation, the explicit instruction way (Hollingsworth and Ybarra, 2009; Archer and Hughes, 2011). Instead, they scaffold assessment tasks (Key element 3: I will help you with English assessment), providing ample teacher direction, enabling students to peer edit each other's work prior to submission, thus acknowledging learning preferences, as Barnes (2000) encourages. Effective, responsive teachers devise their own child-friendly rubrics, so that students know exactly what is required of them. However, responsive practitioners also deviate

from the mandated assessment tasks, offering assessment alternatives, such as presenting orally, as D'Aiatti did, meeting students' needs to be assessed in a multitude of ways. For example, students told D'Aiatti that it was extremely important to them to be able to speak confidently in front of the community on their upcoming graduation night. In their eyes, and in the eyes of the community, this was a significant social event. In meeting her students' needs, D'Aiatti rejected certain parts of the mandated curriculum to enable students and herself to focus on their presentation skills. Furthermore, in order to avoid shame or embarrassment, effective teachers in the Torres Strait do not fill their classroom walls with data, as is the explicit instruction norm (Hollingsworth and Ybarra, 2009; Archer and Hughes, 2011), but they avoid spotlighting (Osborne, 2001), instead providing students with a choice as to whether their academic results are displayed or not. Indeed, some students in the 6/7 class chose not to have their work displayed on the classroom wall.

### Finding 7

This study revealed that effective practitioners should not necessarily follow the explicit instruction practice of students working individually and competitively. At times, effective teachers engage in cooperative learning (Key element 4: I will consider our class dynamics in English), allowing students to work successfully with their peers, acknowledging the many benefits of learning in this way (De Jong and Hawley, 1995; Allan, 2006), and bringing the values of the community into the classroom. What is more, such practitioners teach students social and life skills (Kuhn, 2007; Taylor and Sobel, 2011), rather than focusing solely on skills required to complete academic classroom tasks. In response to D'Aiatti's students' requests, the class engaged in cooperative learning on a weekly basis for one term. Follow-up conversations with the students revealed that, in their eyes, this had been a worthwhile process, enabling them to learn a new set of skills.

### Finding 8

Finally, teachers must strive to embed Islander values into learning (Nakata, 2011), because adopting this practice allows students to determine their own success (Key element 5: I will help you feel successful at school, particularly in English). One of the ways the first author did this was by bringing the community into the learning, acknowledging community values and beliefs. As Taylor and Sobel (2011) emphasise, the learning must be contextualised, meaningful and relevant so that Islander students can understand the content being presented to them. However, in doing this, D'Aiatti was able to realise her own limitations regarding indigenous knowledge, as a non-indigenous person, and adopting a responsive pedagogical mindset, she was able to learn from the community members.

### Conclusion

This action research study explored the perceptions and experiences of Torres Strait Islander students in a 6/7 class. This study examined the two prominent pedagogical approaches of explicit instruction and culturally responsive teaching, and how both could be utilised within the classroom. Specifically, the research question herewith discussed examined the guiding principles and practices that teachers should consider in trying to embed more responsive practices. This study revealed that in

meeting the needs of Islander students, there are guiding principles and practices which must underpin a teacher's thinking in order to ensure the success of their learners. Teachers of Torres Strait Islander students, as demonstrated throughout the student dialogue sessions, must be willing to place their students' needs first, incorporating community values into learning in order to ensure student success. This may mean that teachers choose to deviate from the mandated curriculum requirements, as Aoki (2012) cautions is sometimes necessary. The study revealed that in adopting the explicit instruction model in the classroom, certain practices, as voiced by the students, should be adhered to, so that practitioners can teach explicitly, but also responsively. The five key elements identified by student voice in this research revealed that: students do want to learn, and for this to happen, the explicit instruction model must be used with a more flexible mindset (key element 1). Teachers should not regard the use of students' native language or Creole from a deficit viewpoint, as Walker (2010) also advises. Rather this should be embraced and used to augment students' linguistic skills in English (key element 2). Assessment practices ought to be approached more flexibly. Teachers may allow students to peer edit each other's work, and may offer alternative modes of being assessed, rather than requiring students to work in isolation (key element 3). Further, in respecting community values, practitioners should allow students, as D'Aiitti did, to engage in collaborative learning, enabling them to learn vital social skills (key element 4). Finally, practitioners must strive to embed Islander values into learning (Nakata, 2011), because adopting this practice allows students to determine their own success (key element 5).

Through the journal reflections, D'Aiitti was able to consider possible areas of contention in her teaching. Her thoughts, pertaining to her practice, were documented throughout the year in her journal entries, and much of the data patterns revealed were used to scrutinise and subsequently adjust her practice to meet the learners' needs. The teacher observations were critical to this study, for while the main focus of these observations was indeed the first author's explicit instruction teaching (as mandated by the Education Department), she was provided with suggestions, by the Head of Campus, on how to refine her explicit instruction teaching strategies. The student work samples, collected in term one and term four, provided D'Aiitti with vital evidence on the writing requirements of her students and the assistance she needed to provide to ensure their success.

However, the most powerful data collection tools, on this journey of responsiveness, were indeed the students' voices. It was their voices that guided the direction of the research, as was shown throughout the dialogue and yarning circle sessions. D'Aiitti asked questions, allowing students to critique her teaching, then she acted on those responses by adjusting and refining her practice. This adjustment of practice took place in each of the four research cycles and D'Aiitti believed, enabled her to become a more responsive teacher.

In a context where teacher turnover is commonly biannually, relationships, as revealed throughout the study, are paramount. These relationships should not be limited to the classroom, but should also extend beyond the school environment, into the community. To do this, teachers may, as D'Aiitti did, choose to deviate from the mandated curriculum, respecting community values, placing students' needs first. Further, the explicit instruction model, as this study found, should not be rejected in its entirety, but rather teachers should use it more cautiously, considering how it can be re-adjusted, re-aligned and re-positioned to meet student

needs. Each of the five key elements, identified in this study, demonstrated the way in which the explicit instruction model could be used more harmoniously with responsive practices. Despite the contribution to the current literature that this study has made, it is critical that further studies be conducted. Such a view is crucial if Torres Strait Islander students are to have a chance of fully participating in society, but in a way that they choose to participate. Critically, studies of Torres Strait Islanders, and specifically studies that consider students' perceptions of 'teaching effectiveness', are void in the literature. This study could be viewed as a stimulus for other researchers to expand upon the issues it has raised and expand upon the literature on effective teaching practices, such as the study presented by Hattie (2012). This study focused on the skills of writing and speaking. These were chosen intentionally as D'Aiitti's students believed the EAL/D focus to be of greatest concern to their success in formal education. It could be suggested, however, that further research focuses on students' needs within other disciplines, thereby offering an alternative perspective. Additionally, each of the five key concerns merits further investigation.

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