Research Article

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Talking about culturally responsive approaches to education: teacher professional learning, Indigenous learners and the politics of schooling

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Abstract

Culturally responsive approaches to schooling (CRS) aim to address pervasive inequities that
exist in education. More specifically, CRS practices seek to improve the experiences and aca-
demic achievements of marginalised and minoritised learners, such as those from culturally
and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In this paper, we consider the possibilities for CRS
in the context of Australia where Indigenous students (along with their parents, peers and tea-
chers) are consistently reminded, courtesy of the deficit government policies and 'close the
gap' rhetoric, that they have the worst educational outcomes of any settler society. This
paper does not seek to offer fixed solutions in response to this. Rather, based on shared experi-
ence researching and teaching together that draw on CRS, the paper foregrounds a collabora-
tive culturally responsive dialogue between the authors. Together we discuss, deliberate and
despair about the state of the education system for Indigenous students, we also remain ten-
tatively hopeful about how CRS might become embedded in teaching and learning, through
teacher professional learning, in ways that are relevant to the Australian context.

Introduction

The current Western model of schooling has been shown again and again to have harmful
consequences for the First Peoples of this country now known as Australia (Gillan *et al.*,
2017). And yet, for tens of thousands of years, Indigenous[1] Peoples have had successful sys-
tems of teaching and learning in-place, from-place. It is only recently that an alternative
system—from elsewhere—has infiltrated, imposed itself and assumed a position of superiority.

> My name is Michelle and I am a Gamilaroi woman from Western NSW. I have been grown up on the lands
> of the Dharawal Peoples and have kin connections all over Australia. This informs my values, beliefs and
> worldview. I'm part of a generation that has had access to (compulsory) schooling, some call this a
> human right. But I can also see the destruction this system has caused my family and communities.
> Schooling was designed to uphold and further an imperial agenda, and we were subjects to civilise, indoc-
> trinate, acculturate, assimilate. I feel little has changed. Though, this is quite a contradictory predicament to
> be in. If I critique schools, do I not value education? If I support schools, am I advocating for assimilation
> and buying into the notion of 'progress'? I've 'surely' benefited from schooling, why so negative? Every day,
> Indigenous students are made acutely aware that they are not at the standard of their non-Indigenous peers.
> As a primary school teacher and now a teacher educator, I have seen students formulate these negative self-
> beliefs from a young age. Such perceptions are more formally communicated through deficit educational
> policies such as 'Closing the Gap' (DFHCSIA, 2009), and reinforced by teachers who plop Indigenous con-
> tent or perspectives into their classroom in problematic and tokenistic ways, and get away with it. I want to
> see things done differently. Can culturally responsive schooling provide this?

Culturally responsive schooling (CRS) is not new. And to be honest, it is not terribly innova-
tive. At least, it should not be viewed this way. It should be standard practice. However, now-
adays schools are shaped by neo-liberal, neo-colonial agendas that seemingly render cultural
responsiveness and relationality as distant ideas (Sleeter, 2012). Teachers have to ensure (aca-
demic) results, and this is often at the expense of relationships (Holmes and Gonzalez, 2017).
Schools, then, have become the ultimate manufacturers in the production and assemblage of
productive citizens as defined and designed by the State. As Youdell (2011, p. 9) frames it,
those involved in education retain the power to 'predict and explain what students can and
cannot do, how they will or will not behave, the futures that are or are not open to them'.

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[1]We use the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' interchangeably in reference to the First Peoples of Australia. We acknow-
ledge that these terms are colonial constructs.

In this paper, we aim to contribute to efforts that propose an imperative shift be made towards CRS, and consequently a fundamental reform to the design and purpose of schooling (c/f Alim and Paris, 2017; Martin *et al.*, 2017). CRS provides a framework to respond to mass, compulsory schooling in a way that disrupts white hegemony and recentres the sharing of power and knowledge production between student and teacher. This is arguably more significantly required and warranted in connection with Indigenous peoples than any other group in Australia. We propose one necessary avenue for such reform is via teacher professional learning (henceforth, PL).

> My name is Greg, a child of the 20th century movement of peoples from Europe to settings such as Australia. Reflecting on my schooling, which started in the 1970s, I now view it as a confused and confusing amalgamation of learning that reproduced white-washed hierarchies and sensibilities, sprinkled with multicultural highlights that added flavour and colour. Not that I/it was openly named as such, my schooling across the 80s and into the 90s in higher education, did little to question or challenge the notion that the world was run by and for white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual people such as myself. It was indeed a schooling experience that was responsive to my cultural frames of reference, symbols, and worldviews. I feel as though little has changed. Though, this is quite a contradictory predicament to be in. If I critique schools, do I not value education? If I support schools, am I advocating for the continuance of the status quo? I've 'surely' benefited from schooling, why so negative? As a high school educator and now teacher educator, I must own part of this story. And I need to be conscious of my place within it. This is the way to find a way forward. Isn't it? From this location I now read, hear and see deficit educational policies such as 'Closing the Gap' (DFHCSIA, 2009) in different, and more critical, ways. How these policies are reinforced by teachers who plop Indigenous content or perspectives into their classroom in problematic and tokenistic ways, in the hope of improving Indigenous student achievement. I want to see things done differently. Can culturally responsive schooling provide this?

This paper is shaped as a conversation, a collaborative culturally responsive dialogue, between the two authors, which we have often engaged in while working together over the last few years. We wanted the paper to reflect the CRS theoretical framing we are proposing, an opportunity for us to 'walk our talk'. For the most part, the dialogue occurred face-to-face, grappling with questions that led to more questions, with the written form taking shape after many hours of discussion and deliberation. The approach resonates with a culturally responsive methodology, across the paper we attend closely to concerns to do with positionality, relationships, power and knowledge production (Berryman *et al.*, 2013). We also draw on short stories/vignettes, seen throughout in italics, to invite the reader into our experiences as researchers. This is an approach that includes 'cultural and epistemological pluralism, deconstruction of Western colonial traditions of research, and primacy of relationships within a culturally responsive dialogical encounter' (Berryman *et al.*, 2013, p. 15).

Firstly, we will discuss CRS as we understand it, followed by our reflection on a project we have worked on, to provide a backdrop of who we are, where we have come from and our own relationality. Michelle leads on a commentary review of empirical papers connected with CRS, prompting a focus on PL as a means to develop teachers' knowledge and understanding of CRS, and to generate strategies to implement CRS in teaching and learning for the benefit of Aboriginal students, and, arguably, all students. Finally, we consider where to next—what actions are necessary to ensure future generations of Aboriginal students are not discouraged from education because of harmful schooling practices?

Culturally responsive schooling—as we understand it

The theoretical foundations of culturally responsive approaches to schooling are, much like many things encountered in Australia, imported from another time and place. Alim and Paris (2017) provide a useful outline that locates the foundations of CRS within a critical pedagogy tradition, with the work of Freire in Brazil in the 1970s useful with gesturing to elements such as an emancipatory vision, the role of praxis and critical consciousness. Another important contribution has come from the work of Moll *et al.* (1992) in the early 80s, further north at the edges of United States, with their research developing the 'funds of knowledge' approach that encourages a shift to focus on the community or cultural wealth that students arrive at school with. Further north still and a little later again, Ladson-Billings (2014) research with African American students led to further refinements of the approach, with the emphasis placed on intellectual growth, intercultural knowledge and fluency, and socio-political consciousness. Contemporaneous with this, Gay (2010) highlighted that the codes of learning are shaped in and by cultural (linguistic) frames of reference, that conventional forms of reform are inadequate when addressing deficit theorising, and ethics of care are fundamental for improving the experiences of students. This is of course far from a comprehensive list of those that have made theoretical contributions to the broad collection of schooling practices that are now linked with CRS. However, it is a collection of contributions that has strongly influenced our engagement with 'pedagogical theorising' and the contestations of knowledge production framing our conceptualisations of CRS (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

In common, the various threads of CRS share concerns with the experiences of marginalised and minoritised students. More to the point, dominant forms of schooling are understood as being actively harmful to many students from these backgrounds. Advocates of CRS are focused on interrupting the ways that power is deployed in/through education and the links this has with the reproduction of racialised and cultural hierarchies. With a view to working towards this, Ladson-Billings (2014) outlined three interwoven ambitions in her approach to CRS. Namely, to create teaching and learning experiences that are (1) intellectually demanding, (2) foster intercultural knowledge and fluency, and (3) aspire to raise student socio-political consciousness. Hence, CRS has been described as explicitly political, working with dynamic and expansive understandings of culture, and involving schooling practices that evolve and respond to shifting contemporary and contextual circumstances (Alim and Paris, 2017).

While the approach is often drawn towards focusing on the pedagog or pedagogy, more recently, attention has increasingly been (re)directed towards considering this more holistically to include issues with policy (Egan, 2015), leadership (Khalifa *et al.*, 2016), the curriculum (Aronson and Laughter, 2016) and community (Yosso, 2005) to name a few. With a view to this growing literature, there are examples from Australia where CRS is named and engaged with (c/f Perso and Hayward, 2015). However, as noted by Hattam (2018) and Sleeter (2012), to date there remains a poor research evidence base in terms of developing an empirical argument in support of the approach. Additionally, Hattam (2018) and Morrison *et al.* (2019) make note of the absence of CRS theorising that is focused on or

from Australia itself. A limitation and concern the authors agree with and share the view that more effort in this space is required. There are important questions yet to be addressed about how CRS can be reworked for the Australian setting. Let alone, as we put forward earlier, whether or not it is suitable at all for this context. Further consideration is required, then, to elaborate on these lines of thinking, and in relation to the research projects we have worked on together.

A project we have worked on together

> (Greg) We were standing at the edge of graveyard that overlooked the ocean, in a field that was hidden away from public view and passers-by. Aunty M was sharing stories about her ancestors and the interactions they had with the people that arrived in the years that followed Sydney being established as a city in the newly federated nation known as Australia. They were stories of survival. In some cases, they were stories of camaraderie. I stood towards the back of the group of teachers that had gathered around Aunty M, they were listening once again as she shared stories with them about her decades of life in the local area. As was often the case, there was a lightness and casualness in her voice. On this occasion, I found myself pausing to listen closely. How many times had she shared stories like this? How did she sound like that? I felt myself wanting to question what the educators were also hearing. When I listened closely to Aunty M at times like this, the stories seemed to echo with the violence that underpinned the memories of resistance and triumph she was sharing. On this instance, we stood on land not too far from where the first tall ships sailed into a harbour and started the process of invasion. As the stories came to a close and the group started to move across the rocky terrain I could hear some of the teachers talking. A few of them had lived much of their life in the local area also, some had worked at the school for more than 20 years. They now shared stories of disbelief. Why didn't they know this history? Why didn't they know about this site? Why?

The vignette above is an account constructed from Greg's observations during a PL activity Aunty M had been invited to run for one of the schools involved in the *Culture, Community and Curriculum Project* (CCCP). The project was active between 2016 and 2018 and aimed to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of school students across a local cluster of five participating schools (four primary and one secondary) (c/f Bishop et al., 2019). While the schools were geographically linked, the demographics varied considerably, with some having what could be described as very high Aboriginal student enrolment (over 75%), whereas others had much more moderate numbers enrolled (less than 5%).[2] While the experiences of the Aboriginal students were a central concern, from the outset those closely involved with the project sought to advance the import of the curricular and pedagogic reforms being advocated as being for *all* students. The project involved two core intertwined dimensions: the preparation of teachers and school leaders to undertake CRS practices; and the involvement of Aboriginal parents, carers and community members to work collaboratively with teachers and contribute to school decision-making (Sleeter and Cornbleth, 2011).

These two core elements were designed to improve the engagement and achievements of students. To work towards this, efforts were made to utilise and establish a framework that drew on the cultural wealth and knowledge of the local Aboriginal community in ways which were built upon, and hoped to sustain, mutual understanding and respect (Paris and Alim, 2014). The way this looked in practice culminated in the research team trying to facilitate relationship-building strategies between community members and teachers, and subsequently, the collaboration between the community members and teachers in the classroom, and more broadly in connection with planning and schooling practices. The encounter described above, with Aunty M leading an after-school PL activity that entailed all of the teachers in the school grouping themselves together in cars to follow her around to various locations in the local community. She shared socio-historical stories and insights about the community living on the fringes, and witnessing the expanding Sydney urbanisation across the 20th century.

In terms of working together on the project, this emerged somewhat serendipitously. Having recently arrived at the university to take up a new appointment in teacher education, Greg found himself being asked to take leadership of the project that was emerging in association with the close relationship between the School of Education and the local high school. As chance would have it, this also coincided with Michelle's decision to look into post-graduate studies, and the invitation was quickly extended to be involved as a research assistant on the project. The working relationship between Greg and Michelle was grounded within this context, with both undertaking a learning process of getting to know each other, research roles that were new to them, a context that neither knew particularly well, and a theoretical framework for schooling practices that was (to our understanding) relatively untested in the Australian setting.

Learning from (our) culturally responsive research

> (Michelle) 'Let's leave the theory til after lunch aye? Let's just focus on the teachers and community members forming relationships today, that's enough. That's gotta be the starting place and everything will flow from there.'

Michelle did not vocalise it at the time, but upon reflection, she can see that comments like the one above hint at the hesitation she felt towards CRS. She wondered about Greg's insistence to use this as the theoretical framing to underpin the CCCP, which intended to centre local Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives. The commentary above represents a common exchange between Michelle and Greg when facilitating workshops throughout the project. Michelle admits she did not know too much about the theory behind CRS at that time, and although she admired what it stood for, she knew it was not from this place. It was created for a different place, people, purpose. And so, though not confident enough in her new research assistant role to directly question or challenge the use of CRS, indirectly Michelle kept deferring its involvement in CCCP workshops. She was not convinced that time should be spent explicitly exploring the various theoretical frameworks of CRS, when this could detract from the participants establishing relationships and sharing (local) knowledge, stories and theories.

> (Greg) Following the introductions that went around the table, the Aunties were invited to start talking, and talk they did. Their stories about experiences of growing up in Australia across the twentieth century started filling the room. Moving back and forth across time and space, those listening were called on to reflect on the experiences of exclusion

that the Aunties' parents' generation encountered, their own experiences of marginalisation and assimilatory violence, the hostility and disregard they later witnessed as workers in educational settings, and more recently the disappointment and despair they were unavoidably caught up in as grandparents and older members of the local community. But they also spoke of looking forward, of hope, of aspiration … this is where they saw the potential of the CCCP … (Vass *et al.*, 2018, pp. 177–178).

As with the PL activity described earlier by Greg, across the duration of the CCCP, stories shared by community members were of systemic oppression and Indigenous resistance. Often connected both directly and indirectly to decisions made by schooling officials on a local and national level. In the instance being described above, Greg was reflecting on a meeting that involved bringing all the stakeholders together for an update on the projects progress. The Aunties were specifically invited to come and share their stories, but what transpired after the event was the expectation to hear more about the praxis, the application of the CRS theoretical framework, coupled with accounting for how effective this was as measured through empirical metrics.

In essence, we felt as though we were told that there was too much of the Aunties story-telling, but from our perspective, it was these sorts of stories that formed the cultural theorising that was relevant to the local area and the community. As Brayboy (2005, p. 430) argues, 'stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.' The Aunties were sharing the cultural experiences and knowledges that the project was hoping for and designed to be responsive to. However, as with some of the teachers in the project, there was confusion and hesitation when this seemed to deviate too far from positive and celebratory tropes about culture. Thus, illustrating in some respects why Michelle's hesitation about importing in CRS as a theoretical framework for this education research activity was justified.

Hinted at in the example just discussed are concerns to do with positional power and those who exert influence over knowledge making practices in connection with education. The effects of race and racism are often implicit, however as Ladson-Billings (2014) and Gay (2010) suggest, explicitly linking with anti-racism efforts is central to working in culturally responsive ways. For example, attention can and should be directed towards race-making practices that involve students and teachers encoding and 'policing' race and race-related behaviours and utterances (Walton *et al.*, 2014; Vass, 2016). Teachers can be reticent to discuss or confront race talk, which serves to communicate powerful, albeit implicit, messages about the superiority of whiteness.[3] With this approach, teachers are not overtly 'being' racist, yet their silence acts as a reinforcer of the status quo when, for example, non-Aboriginal students are enabled to insist, with confidence, what Aboriginality was/is, and who could 'be' Aboriginal—sometimes in reference to the Aboriginal peers they sit alongside.

Such assertions are indicative of a white possessive logic (Moreton-Robinson, 2009), whereby identity gatekeepers perpetuate whiteness as the authority to determine who can identify, and be identified, as Indigenous. In these everyday race-making situations, whiteness is protected and affirmed as superior. This can also be observed in the protective enclave of the staffroom, where small, subtle and seemingly incidental or harmless

interactions operate as 'white microaffirmations' (Vass, 2018). The 'wink wink, nudge, nudge' of whiteness, such as overlooking a disparaging comment from an educator about an Aboriginal student or family, or justifying such comments as 'harmless fun' and not to be taken seriously. Practices such as this have implications for relationships in the classroom, both in terms of the identity-work of students and teachers, and also with regard to the knowledges being produced, authorised and legitimated (Walton, 2018). If these efforts are not responsive in a genuine and critical way to the cultural and linguistic diversity present, the dominant cultural frames of reference are reproduced.

> (Michelle) Nowadays, whiteness has been encoded in the fibres of our society and surroundings. It's just 'normal'. Everywhere you look are reminders. It is a challenge to walk for 10 min in any urban or rural place without coming come across a plaque, a street sign, a river (renamed), a building, a park, or a school name that denotes the superiority of whiteness (and the patriarchy) (Schlunke, 2008). King Street, Macquarie Park, James Cook High School, Murray-Darling Basin. A reminder. Where Greg and I sit contemplating this, at a writing eco-retreat with no phone reception, alongside gentle tappings of the keyboard, we can hear magpies communicating. Their songs remarkable. Eastern whip-birds are also present, their striking precision forming an extraordinary duet. And, every few minutes, drowning out all other sounds, a gang of domesticated turkeys gobble. A reminder. The area is lush and green after a nightfall of heavy rain. A row of deciduous trees stand proudly in front of the house, their leaves reminiscent of North American movies depicting suburban streets. Beyond the house, shielding the magnificent rock platforms is the bush. The rugged, impenetrable, Australian bush. Beyond, but not incorporated into the property. A reminder.

How then to interrupt these 'everyday' race-making practices, the normalisation of whiteness as superior, and the subtle yet harmful occurrences of white microaffirmations? Recent experiences show that it does not get any easier when working with initial teacher educators to enact CRS practices during professional experiences (Vass, 2017). Although the pre-service teachers were interested in developing their skills and understandings of CRS during a pilot study in 2016, what appeared to be an impenetrable barrier emerged (Vass, 2017). Surprising all those involved, the supervising teachers tended to actively discourage the participants from drawing on and implementing the deeper and more political dimensions of CRS. There are potentially serious consequences for CRS stemming from supervising teachers holding such an influential role in the evaluation of professional experiences (c/f Marx, 2006), and for the most part in this case, the pre-service teachers abandoned CRS (Vass, 2017).

In the second phase of the project, the design of the study shifted to address this issue by working with pre-service teachers in their final year *and* their supervising teachers. The study was based in one school, with an Aboriginal student population making up nearly 35% enrolment, this group were a major focus for the research participants. The collaboration was helpful with reducing the impact of the supervising teacher in terms of suppressing the culturally responsive practices, however concerns remain regarding critically engaging with the deeper undercurrents hoped for with CRS. This is gestured to in the following excerpt from an interview at the culmination of the professional experience:

> There was a thing that I did where I asked them to—because some of them … well, a lot them, just don't like to write down anything. Maybe they're more visual learners and they like to draw. So, I gave them that

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[3]We use the term 'whiteness' to describe the structural and discursive practices of domination, drawing on the work of Moreton-Robinson (2004, p. 78): 'whiteness is not just about bodies and skin colour'.

opportunity to—I gave them a sheet where they could draw it—the key idea—so like British settlement, a key Indigenous figure [and so on]. So, they might draw the ships coming towards the shore and the Aboriginal people, figures, waiting to see what's happening […] It was a heavily scaffolded activity that they were interested in and it got them pretty quiet for the most part of the lesson. Again, the class that we've been looking at is a bit lower ability, so they're keen to draw it, but when it came to writing the ideas, which I basically kind of spoon-fed them through a joint construction … (Vass, forthcoming).

It is disturbing to encounter the invocation of 'Aboriginal learning style' in connection with practices associated with CRS. The example above was a response to being asked about experiences of being culturally responsive in the classroom, yet the initial teacher educator offers uncritical generalisations about 'them' and 'their' learning. This suggests the teacher is applying a one-size-fits-all approach; reinforcing the idea that all Aboriginal students learn the same (visually), and hence rigorous tasks (writing) must be 'spoon-fed'. Moreover, it appears as though the supervising teacher was unhelpful or ineffective with addressing these lines of concern in this instance. Looking forward, this raises questions about the widespread implementation of CRS without appropriate teacher PL as potentially having detrimental consequences. These experiences of working with CRS in research projects has reiterated concerns regarding the thin and uneven evidence base to adequately support widespread implementation of CRS.

A focus on PL in relation to CRS and First Nations students —lessons from the empirical

> A more focused definition of PL in relation to Indigenous education may emphasise opportunities for educators to critically reflect on deficit theorising (Vass et al., 2019).

As Sarra (2011) encountered in his research, what he refers to as 'Mainstream Australia' continues to hold a collection of gross misconceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Consequently, this extends to the teaching profession where less than 1% of teachers in Australia are Indigenous (Santoro, 2015). Needless to say, much effort is still required to more effectively educate teachers in Indigenous histories and cultures, alongside critically accounting for the reproduction and impact of whiteness (Craven et al., 2014). Particularly when given teachers' influential position in the lives of young people. Decades of research indicate that Aboriginal students fare poorly at school on a multitude of factors (Gillan et al., 2017), and yet educational policy continues to focus primarily on academic underachievement, low retention and poor attendance, with little mention or regard for the ongoing effects of colonialism and the negative impact this has on Indigenous students' health and wellbeing. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience daily racism and institutional discrimination within schools in Australia (Brown, 2018), with research showing it is 'teachers who are often mentioned as a primary reason' Indigenous students leave school (Lampert, 2012, p. 89). Are teachers aware of this? If so, what are they doing to rectify the situation? The teaching profession maintains pride in being caring and humanitarian, yet a population of students are enduring harm. If teachers are not aware of this, can PL in CRS provide an avenue to learn about, and work towards overturning, systemic harm and discrimination?

Despite the examples and evidence recounted here, we hold onto the view that PL is a viable avenue. The domain of teacher education is important also, however a seemingly precarious place to start building the skills, capacity and resilience for preservice teachers to adequately employ CRS principles—if there is no concurrent change within schools themselves. Furthermore, research has shown that many educators graduate with insufficient knowledge and confidence on how to effectively engage Aboriginal students (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). Echoing Hammerness et al. (2005, p. 358) assertion that 'the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for optimal teaching are not something that can be fully developed in preservice education programs'. Given this is the case, a strong argument can be made for genuine and widespread PL in this area. In-service teachers already hold status and power to engage more deeply with the principles and practices of CRS through PL. They can encourage changes to the school culture, to one that is not only culturally safe, but also nourishing and sustaining the cultural linguistic frameworks that students arrive at school with (Alim and Paris, 2017).

To achieve this, more work is needed to address deficit and race-based assumptions in PL (c/f Bishop et al., 2014; Gillan et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2019). Currently, there is limited evidence to suggest that teachers' understandings, beliefs and values are being challenged (or changed) in PL which purports to be focused on improving the academic achievements or experiences of Indigenous learners in Australia (Vass et al., 2019). Martin et al. (2017, p. 251) argue that 'raising awareness of whiteness has to be the starting point from which to disrupt the colonial socialized teacher ontology.' Hence, to improve the schooling experiences of Indigenous students, teachers undertaking PL in Indigenous education should be encouraged to question their ontology and axiology – i.e. who you are and where you are (coming) from (Bishop & Durksen, 2020).

In 2005, the NSW Minister for Education and Training mandated Aboriginal Education in all NSW Teacher Education Institutions (McKnight, 2016). However, the higher education sector is only very recently starting to catch up with this requirement (Thorpe and Burgess, 2016), which means there are a great many teachers in classrooms who have not received any formal university training in Aboriginal education. A point recently highlighted in a major survey of teachers across the state conducted by Craven et al. (2014). Unfortunately, the result is that many educators do not see importance or relevance in having a critical awareness of whiteness, colonialism or 'Indigenous education'. As found by Ma Rhea et al. (2012, p. 11), who maintain 'many non-Indigenous teachers consider that it is their choice as to whether they focus on developing their formal professional knowledge in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education.' Yet, this 'choice' should be a false one.

A focus on the education policy architecture reveals a mandate to include Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum nationally in the form of the Cross-Curricular Priorities. Teachers have no 'choice' in this. Additionally, teachers have a professional obligation to meet the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* with two focus areas directly relating to Indigenous education: *1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*; and *2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). Despite these policy requirements, as with other settler-colonial settings, the majority of teachers have insufficient 'awareness and understanding of Indigenous cultures, histories, and political issues' (Castagno and Brayboy, 2008, p. 972). This sentiment was recently echoed by Blair (2015),

insisting that despite a focus on teachers embedding Aboriginal perspectives, what has emerged is a lack of context and knowledge around what this means, resulting in superficial understandings. From our perspective, it is evident widespread PL is needed; there is much work to be done.

Where do we go from here? A conversation between author 1 and author 2 regarding future PL efforts—in practice and research

Where to start? Is this something that should become policy?

Greg: Isn't it already in policy? It is mandatory, as we just pointed out, that all teachers embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and perspectives in schooling. The recently signed of Mparntwe (Education Council, 2019) has reiterated basically the same agenda that was in the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEECDYA, 2008), they frame the policy architecture and invite teachers to focus on curriculum content as being not only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These are nation building activities, part of the broader narrative of the 'great Australian story'.

Questions and concerns remain however, particularly in connection with the decision-making around who is included and excluded, how and why people are positioned in relation to each other, and so on. As Moreton-Robinson (2009) pointedly reminds us, there is a narrowly defined frame of 'good Aboriginal citizen' that is allowed within this national imaginary, while concurrently there is an absence of critically reflecting on the citizen subject available to other Australians. This is a compelling reminder, for me, of the cultural politics of schooling at work, and why it is so important for educators to engage deeply with these issues. In some respects it comes full circle back to the critical pedagogy foundations that CRS is built upon. Schooling practices need to work towards emancipating both the dominated and the dominators, but we appear as far away from ever as being able to meaningfully have that conversation. This is despite the policy possibilities that are currently available to the sector.

Michelle: This scares me. There is policy in place which should be generating positive change. Yet, little is changing. Is it because the policy lacks a critical frame, and therefore teachers aren't expected to engage on a deeper level? Is it because teachers are unaware of the deficit theorising they may be complicit in? Indeed, why would the system actually want to change—that would have big repercussions for white supremacy. There's talk that the education system is broken, and needs to be fixed. Yet, I see it functioning 'perfectly', the way it was intended. It was designed by the colonisers, for the colonisers, to uphold and further an imperial agenda. Have things really changed? There is little 'evidence' to show this. What it seems you are gesturing to here, is the importance of teachers purposefully and constructively engaging with the politics of knowledge construction as a starting point. That this undertaking is not simply for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but is paramount for all students.

How to convince teachers it is worthwhile?

Greg: As we have seen in the CCCP, teachers do (or at least want to) see that CRS is worthwhile. But, finding the time to engage with the philosophy and politics that sit behind it, to find the ways of exploring and understanding the self as the precursor to reconceptualising relationships with (all) students and local communities, and then putting CRS into cycles of practice and improvement … that is something altogether different. We know, as Applebaum (2010) argues, that 'good intentions' are not enough. Neither is leaving this issue down to the efforts of the willing and interested, of those that find themselves undertaking this work in fairly isolated and unsupported contexts.

Michelle: I get it. It's hard, confronting, challenging. But isn't it worth it? Aren't teachers life-long learners? And what about the Indigenous child/ren sitting in their classroom? If teachers knew the harm they

were potentially causing, would that prompt critical reflection and an eagerness to learn more, to change/challenge behaviours? (c/f Bishop and Durksen, 2020). Whilst it appears there is some awareness of these issues, and a willingness to want to do something about it, unfortunately, year after year, systemic change remains bleak.

How to get on the same page?

Greg: In some respects, a great many people are already on the same page. While 'good intentions' aren't enough, they are a good starting point … and the absence of good intentions is not worth contemplating! So, it is then about how we act on the good intentions. As we have encountered so far in our research efforts, and mirroring some of the earlier research and literature on these issues, a professional learning environment needs to be established that enables change in teachers' understandings, beliefs and values in relation to Indigenous education (c/f Burridge et al., 2012; Burgess, 2017). In the case of the CCCP, when the local community feel as though they are contributing to decision-making connected with schooling, this can be particularly powerful. So, the question then starts being one of scale in some respects. As much as that makes me cringe!

Michelle: I'm with you. We start with the teachers who want to confront race-making, who want to think critically about the structures of the current education system and work to disrupt this for the benefit of all students. CRS provides a framework for these hard conversations to happen. Doesn't it? From here, comes the ripple effect, as we saw in the CCCP; more teachers want to be involved, more schools are interested. All students are benefiting. Once teachers can recognise and then work to interrupt white normative structures of power, students will begin to do so. Those students will become future educators, policy writers, decision makers. It may take a few generations to really take hold, but imagine what the future could look like!

What about sovereignty and Treaty?

Greg: This is quite fundamental isn't it? This is not something that I can remember coming across in any CRS related literature so far. Which, is perhaps not so surprising given that Australia is the only settler-society (or nation state more broadly) that has failed to yet account for the absence of genuinely recognising the import of sovereignty and Treaty as key issues that need to be meaningfully engaged with in schooling … let alone the legal side of these more broadly. I think this is something that we need to consider addressing both more explicitly and centrally in any future CRS projects. While it is not my place to claim knowing, or to try and define, what these might mean to the diversity of Indigenous perspectives around Australia, perhaps I can suggest that they seem to mean something far greater than what is often acknowledged by many non-Indigenous people. If this is the case, wouldn't it mean that sitting down to genuinely listen, and then act on this in some way, is part of the way forward? What will professional learning look and sound like when these conversations have seriously taken place? What will teachers be asked to engage with in schooling? Who will lead the professional learning? What will the implications be for classroom practices?

Conclusion

It has not been our intention to offer firm or fixed suggestions for schooling or PL. Rather, our hope here has been to concurrently model a collaborative culturally responsive dialogue about schooling in Australia, alongside inviting readers to connect with some of the more political and nuanced dimensions of CRS theorising. Engaging deeply in a 'responsive dialogic space' (Berryman et al., 2013) has created conditions in which there are possibilities, privileging deep listening and respectful relationships: 'new knowledge can emerge when both parties are able to act as co-researchers in the co-creation of new knowledge' (p. 22). For

the moment, we both remain cautiously optimistic about the potential for schooling practices to be informed by elements of CRS, in ways that constructively help with achieving some of the equity ambitions that are attached to education. Unquestionably, PL is seen as paramount to increase teacher quality, and as a key strategy for improving Aboriginal student learning (Burridge *et al.*, 2012). The approach to CRS we are canvassing does not view this as being for Indigenous students per se, importantly we view this as something that is for all students. For society more widely. If schooling is in place to shape the nation-hood, which it appears unavoidably designed to do, then questions about who 'we' are, and how people are able to be different yet concurrently included in the 'we', need to be addressed with some urgency.

Concurrent with this, it is long overdue that Aboriginal people have a genuine say regarding schooling (Gillan *et al.*, 2017). It seems quite likely, at least to us, that genuine involvement in decision-making in connection with schooling would enable local communities to have a platform from which to reframe understandings about relationships and to centre sovereignty. Professional learning in Australia cannot wait any longer to embark on this process, as it is not something that will occur like flicking a switch. It will take time. It will require having failures. And disagreements. It will need courage and humility.

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