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TO FREE the SPIRIT? MOTIVATION and ENGAGEMENT of INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article directly responds to issues impacting on the social and academic outcomes of Indigenous students that were identified in the recent review of Aboriginal Education conducted by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) in partnership with New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG). Not surprisingly, a common theme emerging from the review was the importance of student motivation and engagement for Indigenous students of all ages. The article reports on current research into the motivation, engagement and classroom pedagogies for a sample of senior primary Indigenous students. What is of particular interest is the cultural interplay of the lived experiences of these Indigenous students with schools, teachers and classroom pedagogies. Important questions arise from an analysis of this interplay about what might "free the spirit" for these and other Indigenous students.

Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future

"Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future" is the subtitle of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's review into Aboriginal Education (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004). The subtitle captures the need for educators to consider new ways that Indigenous students might be encouraged to achieve equitable outcomes from education at all levels. The study reported in this research picks up on critical issues impacting on this goal. The research recognises that there are important insights to be gleaned about the motivation and engagement of Indigenous students and the ways these, at the same time, interact with and are determined by educational processes. There is much that schools need to understand at the level of the consciousness of students if they are to move more strongly towards socially just outcomes from schooling. In short, there can be no dreaming for the future unless Indigenous students have the determination and spirit to accept the particular challenges that schooling continues to pose for the most marginalised group in Australian society.

Theoretical underpinnings

The study utilises a theoretical framework that brings together concepts around student motivation and student engagement. Research has consistently highlighted the high correlation between motivation and engagement and student educational outcomes (see Fredricks et al., 2004). When considering issues surrounding the achievement of the most educationally disadvantaged students in Australia (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004), motivation and engagement arguably assume an even more critical theoretical and empirical importance. A motivation and engagement framework is now introduced and discussed as a background to the current research.

The Motivation and Engagement Framework (MeE)

The Motivation and Engagement Framework (MeE) has been described in detail elsewhere (Munns & Martin, 2005). For this article a briefer explanation is offered together with school and classroom implications for Indigenous students.

The MeE Framework has three interconnected perspectives: M (motivation), e (small "e" engagement), E (big "E" Engagement). Considered together,

these three perspectives attempt to synthesise both psychological and sociological understandings surrounding student motivation and engagement. Its purpose is to utilise the combined strengths of the psychological and sociological approaches. The strength of the psychological focus is in the understanding of the factors that impact on individual student responses and energies. A sociological strength is found within an examination of the connections between classroom processes and discourses and the wider dimensions of social power. Each of these perspectives is now discussed together with school and classroom implications for Indigenous students.

The M perspective – student motivation

The M perspective has an individual psychological focus and is informed by Martin's *Student Motivation and Engagement Wheel* (Martin, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). This perspective draws on research literature to point to positive motivating thoughts (self-efficacy, mastery-orientation, and value of schooling) and actions (persistence, planning, study management). It also highlights what gets in the way of motivation: impeding thoughts (anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control) and maladaptive behaviours (self-handicapping and disengagement). The M perspective provides an important way of understanding the complex **individual** ways that students construct their classroom relationships in both positive and negative ways. There are a number of key questions that educators might then consider in order to offer support for individual Indigenous students to become more motivated:

- What support is there for each Indigenous student to develop a belief and confidence in ability to succeed at school, overcome challenges and perform at his/her best?
- What individual encouragement is there for each Indigenous student to focus on learning, solving problems and developing skills?
- How is each Indigenous student helped to see that school is useful, important and relevant for himself/herself?
- How is there individual help for each Indigenous student to overcome his/her own anxiety, take risks (not avoid failure) and have more control over his/her learning?
- Is there pedagogy that promotes effort and persistence for each Indigenous student?
- Where can there be teaching and learning that fosters key individual self-regulatory processes such as planning, monitoring, and study management for each Indigenous student?
- How can there be practices that help each Indigenous student manage or minimise maladaptive behavioural dimensions such as self-handicapping and avoidance?

The answers to these questions may be found across the whole spectrum of school and classroom spaces, activities and learning experiences. For example, Indigenous students might be individually supported towards motivation through positive student-teacher relationships, the classroom philosophy, extra-curricular activities, culturally inclusive curricula, support programs. Note that the focus of this perspective of the *MeE Framework* is on individual support, and this implies that the needs of each Indigenous student should be considered separately. This is not to acknowledge emphatically that individuals need to be understood as members of a cultural group who invariably have to negotiate complex multiple identities (see Delpit, 2006; Simpson et al., 2001). A further consideration of group issues as they interplay with teachers' pedagogies are picked up in the sociological point of view of the small "e" perspective.

The small "e" engagement perspective – student engagement

The small "e" engagement perspective is particularly concerned with teachers' classroom pedagogies and their effect on the wider relationships that students develop with education, schools and classrooms. Drawing on ideas from the sociology of pedagogy and the research of the Fair Go Project (Munns, 2007), the small "e" perspective considers the kinds of classrooms that will encourage levels of substantive student engagement. Here a distinction is drawn between substantive and procedural engagement. When students are substantively engaged they have a psychological investment in their learning experiences. They are "in task". When students are procedurally engaged they are complying with teacher instructions and are "on task". It is that substantive engagement that the Fair Go Project terms small "e" engagement. It is defined as the multifaceted coming together of the cognitive, affective and operative at high levels. Put simply, this means students are thinking hard, feeling good and working well. The implications for classroom pedagogies are captured in the Fair Go Project's "engaging pedagogies". These pedagogies have a dual focus on classroom experiences designed to encourage high cognitive, affective and procedural responses from students at the same time as there is the development of a collaborative learning community (see Fair Go Team, 2006, for a wider discussion of these pedagogies). The research argument is that these pedagogies and discourses are the vehicles that carry either engaging or disengaging messages. Such a notion is firstly theoretically underpinned by Bernstein's (1996) conceptualisation of classroom message systems (curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation). Secondly it makes connections between classroom practices and discourses with wider societal structures. While Indigenous students are processing and taking up

positions within the powerful school and classroom message systems they are also negotiating with their teachers "discourses of power": knowledge, ability, control, place and voice. These discourses connect students with wider societal structures and processes. This raises important questions the teachers need to ask themselves about their own classroom pedagogies:

- What counts as knowledge in my classroom and which students have access to really useful knowledge?
- Which students have ability as a result of my teaching?
- Who controls the teaching space in my classroom?
- Which students are valued as individuals and as learners?
- Whose voice is given credence within the teaching spaces in my classroom?

The answers to these questions highlight influences on both sides of the teacher-student exchange: the way teachers teach and how students see themselves as learners. This perspective on student engagement builds on and complements the individual focus and questions of the M perspective. Critically, this perspective opens up opportunities for educators to consider how Indigenous students have historically received disengaging school and classroom messages. From this position alternative pedagogies and discourses might be developed in order to produce messages that powerfully engage all Indigenous learners from all social backgrounds.

The big "E" perspective – long term student engagement

The third perspective of the MeE Framework is big "E" engagement, captured by the term "school is for me". This comes about as a result of the joint effect of the individual and group strategies undertaken within the psychological (M) and sociological (e) frames. That is, the proposed interrelationship of the three perspectives suggests that for each Indigenous student to feel that "school is for me", he/she has to feel supported as an individual learner and as a member of a cohesive and culturally inclusive learning group. It also may be influenced by schools working widely on policies and practices that complement these individual and group strategies. So it is useful to think of "E"ngagement as both a positive social outcome, as well as a whole school focus that encourages Indigenous students to feel valued, supported and catered for across involvement, emotional and cognitive levels. Strategies at this level include a positive school ethos, inclusive curricula choices that support a wide range of learning needs, a variety of extra-curricular and culturally appropriate activities catering for many different interests, peer support through mentoring, the use of role-models and the design of productive post-school options. The key questions for educators within this perspective are:

- How can schools look after Indigenous students in ways that will convince them that this will continue to happen throughout their school career?
- What are the ways that schools can provide Indigenous students with a wide range of educationally worthwhile and enjoyable experiences in curricular areas?
- What are the ways that schools can provide Indigenous students with a wide range of educationally worthwhile, enjoyable and culturally appropriate experiences in extra-curricular areas that will support and not interfere with achievement of academic outcomes?
- In what ways can Indigenous students be supported if they need help when they have learning or behavioural problems?
- What strategies and support systems can schools put into place so that Indigenous students are not left to "fall through the cracks"?
- How can educators help Indigenous students see that their school as a place that will really help them gain the educational resources that will be important for their future lives?

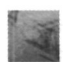
The 20 questions posed within the three perspectives of the MeE Framework can arguably help schools respond in positive ways to the challenge of improving motivation and engagement, and hence help Indigenous students to more productive social and academic outcomes from their schooling. However, research would show that this is a challenge that has not to date been successfully mounted across educational systems (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004), and so there is still much that we need to discover about the relationships that Indigenous students have with their schools, classrooms and teachers. The next section of the article reports on a study that attempted to find out more about the motivation and engagement of Indigenous students.

The research

The research reported in this article was part of a federally funded study looking at self-concept, motivation and engagement among Indigenous students. There was both a quantitative and qualitative component to the larger study, each contributing to our understanding of the issues underpinning Indigenous students' relationships with schools and education, their views of themselves as individuals and learners, and how both of these impact on their school achievement. Quantitative data was collected on student self-concept using the *SDQ1* (Marsh, 1990) and on student motivation through the *Student Motivation Scales* (Martin, 2001, 2003b). Following the

collection of this data, Indigenous students who scored the highest in both self-concept and motivation were interviewed to uncover the individual and collective stories behind the quantitative data. Four students from each school were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Principals, teachers and Aboriginal Education Assistants were also interviewed. Teachers selected for interview were those nominated by the school on the basis of their recognition within the school community as the teacher who has most empathy, association and success with the Indigenous students. The data was collected in five rural and three urban primary schools in New South Wales. The schools are all government schools and were chosen as "exemplary" schools. For this study there were four key overarching criteria used to define an exemplary school for Indigenous students. The first of these was related to academic outcomes and involved measuring student achievement across system (for example, standardised state-wide testing results) and school-based (for example, work samples, class tests) data. Exemplary schools were those where achievements for Indigenous students showed narrowing gaps between their performance and non-Indigenous students. The second criteria was based upon social outcomes and referred to significant numbers of motivated and engaged students as shown through classroom observations and attendance and behavioural data (for example, fewer Indigenous students being recorded in detention and suspension records). The standing that the school has within the local educational and Indigenous community was the third criteria. It was reasoned that an exemplary school would have a good reputation for achieving success with students of all backgrounds, and particularly Indigenous students. Finally, the fourth criteria, the successful transition of Indigenous students from primary to secondary school was seen to be important, given that research has consistently shown that this transition is a hazardous step (e.g., Munns, 2005; NSWDET, 2004). Schools were selected against these four criteria through consulting Aboriginal Education Consultants (working within school districts to improve outcomes for Indigenous students), the New South Wales Department of Education's Aboriginal Education Unit (responsible for the delivery of Aboriginal Education across New South Wales public schools) and the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (representing Aboriginal communities in advising about Indigenous education at local, regional and state levels).

The analysis of qualitative data from student and teacher interviews follows in the next section.



Motivated and engaged Indigenous students and their classrooms

The analysis focuses on a certain kind of pedagogical response found in many classrooms where there are Indigenous students. This pedagogical response produces classrooms that are highly structured, strongly stratified along student ability grounds and predictable in their routines. Learning experiences in these classrooms are characterised by low level and repetitive learning. Such classrooms bear disturbing resemblances to the "pedagogy of poverty" long exposed by Haberman (1991) and more recently analysed by Munns (2005). It must be pointed out that not all classrooms in the current study would fit this pedagogical pattern. Indeed, quite a few classrooms located for this study operated within what was seen to be a much more progressive, responsive and culturally supportive philosophy. Teachers in these classrooms presented an encouragingly positive picture of what Indigenous students might need to find throughout their schooling experiences (see Munns, 2006, for an analysis of this pedagogy).

It is hoped readers will forgive a focus on pedagogies that are not likely to encourage enduring levels of motivation and engagement. The reason for the focus on these kinds of classrooms is that first, they persist (NSW AECG & NSW DET, 2004), second they stand in stark contrast to the kinds of motivating and engaging educational environments that the research presented in the previous section within the MeE Framework promotes and finally, the analysis might challenge educators to consider the merit of developing alternative pedagogical responses.

Within the analysis there are two sections. The first shares student views about their relationships with education and their classrooms. The second uses student and teacher interview data to expose shortcomings in the teachers' pedagogical responses to their students.

Indigenous students' relationships

The spirit is willing

Given that the Indigenous students interviewed were identified through quantitative methods to be highly motivated and engaged, and given the high correlation between motivation, engagement and desirable educational outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004) it came as no surprise that all Indigenous students interviewed reported that they were doing well at school. They commonly talked about the value of school and the support they received to keep going in education through significant adults in their lives (parents, grandparents, community members). There was a sense however, that doing well at school was associated with just getting the work done and finishing quickly. Invariably this success was equated with finishing before others. Consider this comment, for example:

> I'm really good, because I'm really getting on with my work. Because I'm nearly the first one finished ... I'm not talking as much as I used to ...

The theme of getting through the work and defining success by completion over quality seemed to be supported by the nature of teachers' classroom curricula and pedagogies. This will be picked up later in this article. Notwithstanding this issue, there was a general determination across interviewees to go the full educational distance when they got to secondary school. Most harboured ambitions of going to university, and this is heartening given the historical difficulties Indigenous students have faced completing secondary school:

> I get through all my work. I think I'll make it to Year 12 ... I'm going to go to Uni ... I just want to do further studies ...

This data revealed much about family and community support and the value that was placed on education. It also highlighted the lack of positive motivating factors at the heart of the classroom philosophy these students found themselves in. The M perspective of the MeE Framework points to these motivating factors. However, encouraging Indigenous students to be persistent, to develop study habits, to work towards a mastery orientation (working hard as its own reward) did not appear evident in the reports that students gave. Furthermore, their classroom success invariably placed them in difficult cultural dilemmas, and this is now discussed.

Cultural awareness

It was very apparent during the interviews that these educationally successful and assured students were strongly aware of the comparative lack of success and interest displayed by the other Indigenous students in their classrooms. This certainly raises again questions surrounding the cultural prices that might have to be paid by Indigenous people who gain success when others around them are struggling (Ogbu, 1999). The students talked about Indigenous peers who were continually getting into trouble:

> They all make noises, run around, run amok ... most of the time they don't finish their work and when they do finish they just run amok for fun. They get in trouble.

Clearly there seemed to be a mixture of engaging and disengaging messages at play in these classrooms (small "e" perspective). The Indigenous students who were not achieving and disaffected in the classrooms appeared to be continually on the receiving end of messages that pointed to their lack of ability and their restricted voice in classroom pedagogical spaces. Consequently their daily classroom experiences were about classroom discipline struggles. Interestingly, the participants suggested some very thoughtful analyses of the reasons behind these other students not cooperating within their classrooms. Perhaps they had worked through for themselves some of these recurrent classroom issues around risk-taking and being ***shamed*** at school (see Munns, 2005; Sharifian, 2005):

> Why do you think they don't ask for help?
>
> Because they probably think that's an easy answer and they think they might get in trouble. Yeah, because they've asked too many questions, easy ones.

Awareness of other students appeared to be related to the structures in operation in quite a few of the classrooms. It was shown above that many students seemed to see achievement in classrooms meant hurriedly completing tasks. Interview data revealed that fast finishing students were then kept occupied by helping other students, and this brought them face to face with the classroom difficulties that others were dealing with. Many found this a confronting aspect of their classroom life, as the following comments show:

> I usually help some people, because I'm usually the first one finished. Because I rush. They just put their hands up and they say, "Can I please have help over here" and I just go over and help them ... they always talk when they're supposed to be doing their work and when Miss is helping someone right next to them, they laugh real loud and put her off. They're most of the people that I help with their work ...

As well as the strong awareness that many Indigenous interviewees displayed towards the plight of their classmates, they also showed some intriguing insights into the ways their classrooms operated. Of particular interest for this study were their views on what motivated and engaged them in classrooms. This is now addressed.

Insights into classroom processes

A theme emerging from the interviews was that these Indigenous students brought interesting insights about their classroom experiences and the ways teachers responded to their contexts. An intriguing point was the students' understanding of the ways teachers attempted to maintain control in their classrooms. As shown above, many Indigenous students commented about the nature of the learning experiences offered to them. Furthermore, a representative group of students remarked about the ways their teachers used extrinsic rewards to encourage compliance in classroom work. While it is beyond the scope of this research to determine whether this impacted positively in these

classrooms, it was quite clear that for many of these motivated students they worked within a mastery, as opposed to a competitive or a goal orientation. Such an orientation is adaptive for motivation within the M perspective. That is, they worked hard because they wanted to do well for themselves. Indeed, some were keen to point out that their motivations worked independently of teachers' actions. It would be interesting to get teachers' reactions to the following observations, especially when many teachers appear to believe that a highly structured and heavily rewarded environment is the only approach that "works" in these kinds of school settings:

> On Friday I got a 20, a 20, and a 20 out of 25. So I got 5 frogs and 5 snakes.
>
> So this working for frogs – does that make you try hard?
>
> Nah. Just makes you want to get them.
>
> Would you still try hard if there were no frogs?
>
> Yeah, better education. It's better than sitting at home, doing nothing.
>
> So for a kid like you, the teacher could get you to try hard and not give you any frogs?
>
> Nah. I don't need them.
>
> Why don't you tell the teacher?
>
> Then I wouldn't get any frogs ...

There are a couple of observations to be made about this data. The first has already been suggested. The high-achieving motivated Indigenous students do not appear to need these kinds of rewards. Perhaps more disturbing is the second point. These rewards seem to have little impact on the behaviour of the disengaged students. If we return to the questions raised within the M and "e" perspectives of the MeE Framework, we might then ask whether the teachers might consider spending their professional time and energies developing classroom processes that encourage Indigenous students of all academic and motivation levels to take more control of their own learning, developing problem-solving skills and looking for intrinsic rewards around effort and persistence. Certainly teachers might interrogate their classroom messages around ability, control and voice to reflect on which students are receiving engaging or disengaging messages.

Thus far there have been a number of student themes that have highlighted a recurrent interview theme of the tension between teacher actions and student responses. Tensions and disjunctions in classroom themes are further picked up in the next section of this article.

The nature of classroom pedagogies

Tensions between student perception and responses and teachers' classroom decisions appeared to centre on inconsistencies within pedagogy and curriculum. This needs explaining. While both teachers and students identified that their classrooms were highly structured and low-level learning environments, there was clear evidence that teachers for the most part endeavoured to implement a culturally informed and sensitive pedagogy. So on one hand there are learning experiences characterised by low expectations, work that is more about reproducing than producing, the kinds of tasks that can be routinely completed. On the other hand there is a comforting and sympathetic classroom environment. This is a "cubbyhouse" pedagogy (Munns, 2005) that despite being clothed in social justice trappings, plays out in way that benefits students more socially than academically. These are now described.

Predictable and low-level learning experiences

There was compelling evidence in the interview responses from both teachers and students that they each held conflicting views of how the pedagogical spaces should be defined. What became increasingly apparent was that students saw their classrooms as predictable and routine. Few could name classroom experiences that excited or interested them – there was little surprise or wonder. Some students talked of low-level tasks that were easy to complete: "You don't have to do a lot of work. You can just do what you want to do" and "My teacher just writes it up on the board and all we have to do is copy it". Others discussed teachers who did not present challenges for them:

> I like the computer room because it's easy on the computers and she doesn't push you too hard, to do lots of work.

Ironies surrounded these kinds of classroom experiences. The first was that these did not appear to benefit students at either end of the achievement and behaviour spectrums. As indicated above, the motivated students did not appear to need enticements to work hard and readily got their work done in quick and efficient ways, if finishing in front of others was the way success was measured and rewarded. By contrast, the other "less successful" Indigenous students were offering resistances in the form of misbehaviour and low risk-taking behaviour. The second irony was that almost all of the teachers interviewed appeared to hold the view that this was the best way to structure their classrooms. The following observations were typical of teachers' interviews:

> Avoiding that fear of failure and giving them a chance to develop skills. It might mean going right back, right back to the basics, but it's nice to see the lights go on when they pick it up. And to enjoy their level of success ... Whatever they're good at. Love transcriptions, because you can't fail at transcription so some of the bookwork can be beautifully done, beautifully presented but the comprehension of it is different ... you actually teach the lesson and then they transcribe the notes and then they do their illustrations.

A final irony was that such a classroom approach seemed markedly at odds with the ways these students operated culturally in their lives outside the classrooms. The research literature consistently reveals the different ways that Indigenous students operate culturally inside and outside of the classroom (e.g., Malin, 1990) and how teachers' cultural misinterpretations can contribute to these differential student responses. The belief that students need a structured repetitive classroom environment persists, despite such a structured environment seeming to sit uncomfortably at odds with the autonomy and independence that characterises many of their familial and communal experiences:

> You need to have a system and a routine and a predictability to what you are doing. The kids know that when they walk into this classroom at this particular time of the day, this is what they'll be likely to be doing. Most Koori kids don't cope well with change. They don't cope well with inconsistency.

What seemed to emerge from both the teacher and student interviews was that classroom rewards were readily attainable by all students. When this happens at the expense of intellectually challenging and stimulating learning experiences, and without targeting adaptive aspects of the M perspective or engaging processes within the small "e" perspective, then there are real dangers that there are restricted accesses to educational outcomes across learners of all ability and attainment levels.

Pedagogy: Supportive, individualised and culturally aware discourses

It would be unfair in the analysis of teachers' work in these contexts not to acknowledge their serious attempts to bring forward a socially just and culturally appropriate pedagogy. Indeed there seems much to be learned from the ways they worked on personal and pedagogical relationships in their classrooms. The apparent mismatch between task and relationships is not so much a critique on the teachers' work, as a recognition that there is a further step to be undertaken in their pedagogical journey.

The teachers recognised the importance of working hard in developing their relationships with Indigenous students and the influence those relationships had on the ways they responded to their classrooms. They emphasised informality, fun and enjoyment as keys within these relationships. Note how these views seem to wedge the nature of classroom experiences discussed above:

> I guess that's part of us trying to get that relationship with them, us forming that relationship. I know with my class I work really hard at the beginning, I go through and set my rules and everything like that, but then I like to joke with them as well, so than I'm having fun in class as well as them. I like them to be able to talk to me openly, but then as long as they are respecting class rules and knowing that they are there to learn then I'm quite happy to make the class fun and do things they enjoy to help them with their learning.

Together with the development of these relationships was a recognition among all teachers interviewed that the support and scaffolding for the Indigenous students needed to work in a culturally sensitive way. Such sensitivity to address the low risk-taking behaviours that characterise the classroom responses of many Indigenous students (see, for example, Munns, 2005) broke down at the point of the structure and process of learning experiences. The following remarks from an Indigenous classroom teacher capture a more culturally appropriate way of overcoming the impeding thoughts (anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control) that were earlier brought to light in the M perspective:

> My class is very open and receptive to giving them an instruction and they can follow it. I spend a lot of time sitting next to my Koori kids and guiding them through the process that we need to go through. There other kids in the class that I do need to do that with too, but mainly my Koori kids. Sometimes, I slip into teacher mode without even realising it because I'm catering to – when I'm in AERT I'm just with the Koori kids and we just yarn and I'll use Aboriginal English often and the kids will know what I'm talking about, but when I'm in the classroom I do slip into the out the front teacher mode and sometimes I need to go back and revisit and sit down next time and say, "look you just do it like this" and break down in a way that they can totally understand. I find my kids need to see the end product before we get there.

It was interesting that the teacher interviews revealed that many of them appreciated that the more motivated

students were strongly aware of their peers and how they were going in the classrooms, and how that affected their own work. Again, this emphasises that at a pedagogical level at least, teachers and students shared similar understandings of student motivation and engagement. A further step would appear to be some responses to address the negative consequences for all students of these actions:

> Sitting in class and worrying about other kids. A lot of the time they sit there and worry about what the other person is doing instead of taking in all the instructions and just doing it themselves. They'll listen and they know what the instructions are, but sometimes they worry about what the mate next to him is doing and when he gets in trouble or he doesn't know what to do, the kid will say, you have to do this. He'll know they procedure of what to do, but the fact that he just sits there and doesn't do it straight away, just does it in his own time.

A different pedagogy?

Thus far this article has presented an emerging picture of the dilemmas associated with a low-level curriculum within a conscious attempt to develop a culturally sensitive pedagogy, tentatively suggesting that here was an area for further change in order to enhance the motivation and engagement of the Indigenous students. The argument is that such changes would benefit not only the motivated students who are the focus of the current study, but also their less inspired and lower achieving peers. This argument is concluded with comments by a teacher from one of the schools who had many years of experience working with at-risk and disengaged students. She talked about how she had not only taken on board the pedagogical changes of the other teachers but had also worked on different kinds of learning experiences as well. The nature of her classroom presents an interesting counterpoint to those described earlier:

> Yeah and they're not achieving in [their mainstream] class, therefore they're unhappy ... so we come through the back door here and do things that are not book bound. We build Billycarts. We go on excursions every week, all that sort of thing. We cook every day.
>
> Do you have a sense, that maybe their mainstream classroom should be more like this?
>
> Oh, absolutely. But, it's really hard. I've had people from District office say, you know; reading ages and outcomes, all that sort of thing. Look, that's not we're on about, I'm not interested in addressing particular outcomes, I'm addressing these kids.

Notwithstanding the demands of the system and the undoubted need for accountability and equitable outcomes, these words remind us that looking after all kids in responsive and ambitious ways is what finally counts in classrooms. Research into schools that have significant numbers of motivated and engaged Indigenous students who are achieving strong social and academic outcomes, has pointed to the importance of providing alternate settings for the development of socio-academic outcomes (Munns et al., 2006). Approaches like this that synergise high expectations (Ruge, 2005) and alternate settings and strategies are arguably more likely to gain positive responses to the 20 questions posed above from within the MeE Framework.

Ways forward

To return to those 20 questions offers an opportunity to speculate on positive school and classroom directions that might be adopted for the Indigenous students who are the focus of this study.

Within the M perspective classroom strategies that worked on support for individual Indigenous students at all academic and engagement levels might focus on:

- Learning experiences and assessment processes that emphasise positive achievements and de-emphasise punitive aspects that lower confidence and self-concept.
- Intrinsic reward structures targeting effort, persistence, problem-solving and risk taking.
- Authentic learning that makes explicit home, community and cultural connections.
- A focus on autonomy and self-regulation with frequent opportunities for all students to make decisions about their learning.
- Productive support for students to achieve results through teacher scaffolding and well-planned peer support strategies.

At the small "e" engagement level teachers might carefully consider how their classroom pedagogies:

- Make learning relevant and available to all students.
- Help all students of all academic levels to feel capable of achievement.
- Eliminate classroom struggles over control.
- Encourage all learners to feel good about themselves, their family and their community.
- Provide frequent opportunities for students to reflect on and share ideas about their learning.

Finally at the whole school E perspective, members of staff might work on strategies that:

- **Show Indigenous students that the school will look after all their needs both in the present and into the future.**
- **Develop a wide range of in-class and out-of-class experiences that appeal to students' interests without compromising high expectations and the achievement of academic outcomes.**

Both the answers to the 20 questions and suggestions of ways forward do not contain simple menus that can be quickly taken up. The research has shown that the relationships that Indigenous students have with education, schools and classrooms are complex and context dependent. As such they require considerable time, informed effort and community partnerships that will bring about specific strategies for particular school communities.

Conclusion: A dispiriting or a hopeful pedagogy?

This article has again prompted us to consider that, for all Indigenous students and their families, education continues to be at the same time the problem and the solution. At the heart of this dilemma are teachers' pedagogies, still the most critical resource in the educational lives of educationally disadvantaged students. In an attempt to get to the heart of a solution for this dilemma the article has posed a number of questions to be explored around the motivation and engagement of Indigenous students and some tentative answers to these questions. Perhaps some final questions might be worth asking about these high-achieving and highly motivated students and their less advantaged classmates. Are these successful students engaging with the idea of education rather than its form and substance? They clearly value education and see their future in being successful at school. But can this be sustained without a consistent curricula and pedagogy? That is, can motivation and engagement be sustained towards the "school is for me" big "E" level when they experience classrooms in which they are looked after in a relationship sense but not pushed forward within an intellectually demanding and stimulating environment. We want to suggest that enduring engagement needs a powerful form and substance for it to be sustained, and this is even the case for those motivated students displaying a propensity to go the full educational distance. Even the strongest spirit needs nurturing to push forward successfully into the future. For those less advantaged and secure in their classrooms there are even more compelling reasons to change the form and substance of classrooms.

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