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Teaching and Learning in Aboriginal Education (2nd ed.)

Neil Harrison

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Why didn't we learn about this at university? This is often the cry heard by non-Indigenous teachers when they find themselves faced with meeting the learning needs of Aboriginal students. A reasonable question to ask of pre-service teacher education programs; fortunately when universities finally decide to get serious about answering it, this textbook will be there waiting as an invaluable resource.

Neil Harrison has clearly designed this as a textbook for use by university students, studying to be teachers. It walks, quite successfully, the line of teaching about Aboriginal perspectives and teaching of Aboriginal students. In general the layout is simple and unlike some university textbooks the size is manageable. It is very readable and the language used is accessible and not overcrowded with educational jargon. For reference purposes some interesting facts and key points have been reinforced in margins notes and this could prove very useful for students. One criticism of the layout is the placement of the 'Learning from Experience' boxes that occur in every chapter. While the content contained within them add value to the text overall, their placement substantially interrupts the flow of the text at times.

The content combines a fine balance of the personal experience of the author with some interesting comments and reflections from practicing teachers with recent and ongoing experience. The content is further supported by input from well regarded Aboriginal academics and scholars such as Mick Dodson, David Rose and Paul Hughes. Additionally there are ample references drawn from highly regarded non-Indigenous academics who have been working in this field for the past few decades: Malin, Harris, Christie and Malcolm, to name a few. Follow up references are provided for readers who wish to expand their understandings and the key references used throughout the book are very useful, although at times heavily web based.

This second edition has retained many of the features of the first edition (2008) as well as including three additional chapters. The first of the new chapters (chapter 2) is entitled 'Recognising our History'. It contains a very clear and comprehensive overview of Australian History

both pre- and post-European settlement and pays particular attention to government policies and the impact of the rights movement which go some way to explaining the situation of many Aboriginal people living in Australia today. While the chapter covers important policies and events such as the Wave Hill walk off, The 1967 Referendum, the policy of self determination the impact of the Mabo and Wik decisions, and even covers the Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, the glaring omission of the chapter is the failure to mention the federal government's 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) legislation, commonly referred to as 'The Intervention'. Surely it is important for readers and teacher education students to understand the impact that government policy continues to have over the lives of Aboriginal people in Australia?

The other new sections included in this second edition come from a refreshing and long overdue perspective of Aboriginal learners as high achievers. Chapter 7 looks at Aboriginal children as powerful mathematicians. The authors of this chapter, Peter Howard and Bob Perry, are part of an increasing wealth of research with a focus on the previous knowledge that Aboriginal children bring with them to the classroom. They effectively highlight the importance of teachers working with Aboriginal students to take previous knowledge and existing understandings into consideration as part of their planning for learning. The authors also make some key points about the language needed in the learning and teaching of mathematics and the specific meanings that can be given to certain words and symbols when being used mathematically. Language is often a huge barrier to Aboriginal language speaking students learning subjects like mathematics, so it is encouraging to see such issues being explicitly addressed in this text. Disappointingly the 'boxes' used in the chapter to illustrate various points are little more than short anecdotes of the authors interactions with Indigenous children that show evidence of them thinking mathematically. Is this so different to what all children do? Perhaps some expansion on how to begin with what students know and build on that through engaging in culturally relevant and linguistically

accessible activities would help beginning teachers get a clearer picture of what is intended in this chapter. Also, given the authors talk repeatedly about engaging with traditional knowledge and involving the community it is a shame they have not referenced the extensive work being done in the Top End with Yolngu people as an excellent example of this being put into practice.

The language demands of school and the tension between home and school languages for Aboriginal children is picked up even more strongly in chapter 6 where the author has chosen to focus on the increasingly widely recognised dialect of Aboriginal English. The chapter deals effectively with the complex political and power dynamics that intersect when dealing with majority and minority languages and the privileging of one language over others. It is curious that the author has chosen to focus specifically at Aboriginal English and not at the range of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages that are still spoken everyday as a first language in this country. Perhaps a more general chapter about English as an additional language would broaden the ideas of this chapter to include the richness and depth open to learners who can comprehend the world around them in multiple languages?

In chapter 5 Harrison has bravely waded into the literacy debate by enlisting the expertise of Aboriginal academic David Rose. Rose acknowledges the hotly contested ideas about reading and writing and in particular the importance for Aboriginal students of learning to read and the systemic failure to make this happen over successive generations. He rightly names this as one of the key contributing factors to the 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school achievement outcomes. Rose is one of a number of academics who have been at the heart of extensive research that has explored why exactly Aboriginal children are not learning to read and what sort of program might seek to redress this. His program, 'Reading to Learn', and other similar approaches, based on Vygotsky's theories, are now being widely adopted in schools across rural and remote Australia, with considerable success in places where there are large concentrations of Aboriginal students. Their continued success will, as always, be reliant on Departments of Education providing continued support for their implementation.

Chapter 3, *Aboriginal Ways of Learning*; chapter 4, *Quality Teaching Practices for Aboriginal Children*; and chapter 8, *Behavior Management*, should be compulsory reading for every non-Indigenous teacher working with Aboriginal students. They make explicit so many of the 'invisible' things that create confusion and misunderstandings in cross-cultural classrooms. In particular in chapter 8 the points about autonomy, shame, social cohesion, and the need for the teacher to work hard at building a relationship with the students so that students

manage their own behaviour out of personal respect is especially important. Aboriginal children do not automatically respect teachers as authority figures. This is partly due to culture and partly due to history, and non-Indigenous teachers ignore this difference at their own peril. But, as the author rightly points out, the value of what can be achieved through building a relationship of mutual respect far exceeds anything that could be achieved by teachers digging their heels in and demanding to be respected simply by virtue of being 'the teacher'.

Engaging with community, which is looked at in chapter 9, can be one of the most challenging aspects for non-Indigenous teachers especially when they are working in Aboriginal communities. People are often scared of doing it 'wrong' or of saying something they should not or of causing offense. While it is good to be wary of these things rather than charging in without any consideration of cultural appropriateness, in this chapter Harrison helpfully suggests that at the key to talking to Aboriginal parents is basic humanity. Speak gently, listen, do not be too demanding, get to know them and let them get to know you. It takes time. These things might sound obvious but it is surprising how often they are forgotten.

The final chapter focuses on integrating Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum and is primarily concerned with teaching 'about' Aboriginal Australia. Here the author provides lots of ideas for teachers and challenges them to look beyond the history aspects and genuinely explore Aboriginal language, culture and knowledge. It is especially good to see teachers being encouraged to look and explore first at the local level, to connect with the communities around them. Imagine the difference in race relations we could bring about in this country if all students were personally connected to the Aboriginal history, knowledge and more importantly people in their local area.

This text is not only valuable for pre-service teacher education courses, but would be incredibly useful for those who are just starting work in communities with significant Aboriginal student populations. They will also find this book tremendously helpful during their first months of adjusting to teaching in a context they are unfamiliar with. It is the sort of book that should be used as a resource at orientation programs for new staff, and as a basis for whole school discussion. While it is clearly written with the assumption that the majority of teachers working with the Aboriginal students are non-Indigenous themselves (and sadly this is all too often the case) it does offer some scope for further use. Perhaps as the number of Aboriginal teachers increases there will be room in future editions to include input and advice by Aboriginal teachers to Aboriginal teachers. After all they are naturally the best placed to know what creates success for Aboriginal students.