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Staley, Bea; Freeman, Leonard ; Tipungwuti, Bertram; King, Kial; Mullins, Melanie; Portaminni, Edwina; Puantulura, Rachel; Williams, Marcus; Jason, Nikita; Busch, Anthony

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Barriers to inclusion: Aboriginal pre-service teachers perspectives on inclusive education in their remote Northern Territory schools

Bea Staley <i>Charles Darwin University</i> <i>Bea.Staley@cdu.edu.au</i>	Leonard A. Freeman <i>Charles Darwin University</i> <i>Leonard.freeman@cdu.edu.au</i>
Bertram Tipungwuti¹ <i>Charles Darwin University</i>	Kial King <i>Charles Darwin University</i>
Melanie Mullins <i>Charles Darwin University</i>	Edwina Portaminni <i>Charles Darwin University</i>
Rachel Puantulura <i>Charles Darwin University</i>	Marcus Williams <i>Charles Darwin University</i>
Nikita Jason <i>Charles Darwin University</i>	Anthony Busch <i>Charles Darwin University</i>

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Abstract

Inclusive practices can be interpreted broadly as the ways in which we ensure that all students have an equitable education to optimise student learning outcomes, achievement and attendance. In this paper, Aboriginal pre-service teachers, all currently working towards their teaching degrees and all working as Aboriginal teaching assistants in Northern Territory (NT) classrooms, share their perceptions regarding barriers to inclusion for students in their schools and communities. The reflections were drawn from their university assignments in a unit on inclusive education, which focused on teaching all students including those with additional needs. Pre-service teachers were asked to name barriers to learning for their school-aged students and make suggestions about changes that would help students in/from their communities engage more successfully with school. This paper is intended to privilege the voices of this cohort of pre-service teachers who have significant insight into their schools, given many of them are working in the schools that they themselves attended as students. Using their assignments in the inclusive education unit as a basis for understanding their experiences with exclusion, identified barriers are examined along with their proposed solutions. This work calls for greater cultural inclusion of local languages and traditions. Inclusive and equitable education requires partnership with families and community members so that the education delivered, truly caters for students' diverse learning needs.

Introduction

When the term inclusive education is used, the term typically refers to special education, students with disabilities or students with additional needs. But if we consider inclusive and equitable education within a broader framework, inclusive education rightly refers to education that includes and meets the needs of Australia's diverse and varied student population. That is, all students, including those who come

¹ Co-authors are listed in the order in which their words or ideas first appear in the text rather than by relative contribution

from varied geographic locations, cultural backgrounds, and those learning English as an Additional Language/Dialect (to name but a few).

Equality in education means that everyone gets the same thing, that opportunities are equal, that educational curricula, resources and, by all intents and purposes, educational experiences, are similar if not the same. Australians are partial to ideas around equality and it tends to feed into national sentiments of fairness and a fair go. Equity in education strives for fairness and inclusion in all aspects of education. In practice, equity involves all students receiving what they need to be successful in their schooling. Equity respects differences and provides the support students need to achieve their educational potential. In other words, classroom adaptations, changes in school processes, and student accommodations are fully supported so that all students can access a relevant and appropriate education.

While equality and equity are often used interchangeably by the Australian populace because they sound alike, they are not the same thing. While equity now reigns in education policy documents, equality is still the term used in much public discourse and thinking. It harks back to Australia's deeply ingrained egalitarian principle of ensuring a fair go for all. This is evident when we look back to the 1970s when the Australian Federal Government first adopted the policy of multiculturalism. It was characterised by the then Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby as "equal opportunity for all – a goal which no right-thinking person could dispute" (Grassby, 1973, p.1).

Though equity means fair based on an individual's needs, pre-service teachers often present with an unshakeable belief that equality of opportunity or providing all students with the 'same' is the fairest principle. While all students benefit from language rich classroom environments, empathetic teachers, and evidence-based pedagogies, classroom teachers who provide their students with equitable opportunities to learn, tailor their instruction and scaffolds to meet their students' individual learning needs so all the students can achieve their potential.

Collaborative approaches to education that value Aboriginal and Western languages, cultures and knowledges equally, have generally not been supported by Australian education systems to date (Bat & Guenther, 2013). To provide an example in the Australian education context, we might consider whether Aboriginal students are receiving an equitable education, regarding the inclusion of their languages in early education (Freeman & Staley, 2018). We know that few attempts are made to connect the two major influences on the multilingual child's early learning. Firstly, the home language and cultural experiences that remote Aboriginal students bring to the task of learning, and secondly, the assumptions of English language and Western cultural norms, which underpin the standards, practices and values of Australian schooling and indeed, the Australian curriculum (Perso & Hayward, 2015).

Many Aboriginal education scholars (Nakata, 2007; Marika, 2000; Yunupingu, 1993) have argued that for education to be truly meaningful, relevant and inclusive for their young learners, it is not simply about valuing Aboriginal languages and knowledge in the early years, only as a stepping stone towards a more 'valuable' tradition of colonial language and Western knowledge (Nakata, 2001). Nakata (2001) believes that the starting point to developing educational policies, curriculums and teaching approaches which are more suited to the needs of Aboriginal learners is overcoming the notion of transition that pervades the discourse of Aboriginal education. Currently, Aboriginal learning experiences are thought of in terms of transition from home language to English language (Perso & Hayward, 2015), or from one set of cultural experiences to another (e.g. school).

Equitable education would value both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal languages and knowledges. Aboriginal students often receive an equal education to Australian students: same curriculum, same classroom set up, same age-based learning expectations, same schedules. This is despite a myriad of cultural and contextual differences that are overlooked and underserved. As such, school performance measured by the same assessments, present students in a deficit light (Klenowski, 2016). Marika (2000) states that the practice of National literacy benchmarks is 'doubly discriminatory.' Firstly, because they only value Western literacy and Western knowledge and secondly, because they ignore that Aboriginal language speaking students are on a different learning pathway to monolingual English-speaking students as English language learners. Marika (1999) contends that "our job as educators is to convince the people who control mainstream education that we wish to be included" (p. 9). This paper rises to this challenge by sharing Aboriginal educators' perceptions regarding current barriers to school education.

Multicultural education: A framework for considering Aboriginal students and inclusive education

To expand our thinking regarding the broader issues of equity and inclusion in Australian education, we drew on the scholarship around multicultural education established in Great Britain and the United States. Multicultural education scholarship grew out of issues surrounding race relations and the unequal representation of students from diverse backgrounds in curricular content. In the United States, some of the earliest multicultural scholars wrote about the rights of African American students with concerns that parallel the rights of Australia's Aboriginal learners. They argued that education is often a form of subordination, a way to control and restrict opportunity, and to colonise the mind. Born out of the Civil Rights movement (Banks, 2004), the earliest rendition of multicultural education was known as ethnic studies. This approach sought to develop teaching materials based on African American content and history, insisting on the consideration and presence of varied (non-white) viewpoints in educational texts.

Scholars in multicultural education (for example, Banks & Banks, 2004; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) pursued an agenda of equity in education, calling for a system that respects and responds to difference to better serve the needs of all students. Banks and Banks (1995) defined multicultural equity pedagogy as "teaching strategies and classroom environments that help students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively within, and help create and perpetuate a just, human, and democratic society," with the goal of "helping students become reflective and active citizens" (p. 152). Although the emphasis has been on race and racism, multicultural education also focuses on the experiences of linguistically and ethnically marginalised populations, females, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex (LGBTI) movement, and/or people with disabilities (Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

Sleeter and McLaren (1995) explained that "multicultural education frames inequality in terms of institutionalized oppression and reconfigures the families and communities of oppressed groups as sources of strengths" (p.12). Multicultural education scholarship calls for the consideration, recognition of, and respect for students and teachers of varying backgrounds, lived experiences, and racial and ethnic identities in ways that secure the academic success of students in schools and, consequently, in the larger world (Banks & Banks, 2004). This strengths-based approach contrasts with seeing multicultural students as a problem to be fixed, or a gap to be closed, as is present in much of the discourse around education for Australian Aboriginal populations. The pre-service teacher authors here present underrepresented perspectives in the literature and this work goes toward ameliorating this situation.

Critical multiculturalism takes its tenets from critical pedagogy (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) and combines this with the intent of multicultural education (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995), which aims to move to a place that promotes an interrogation of the structures and situations that create inequality, in small and large ways. This occurs while simultaneously advocating for social, political, and educational change, justice, and equity (May & Sleeter, 2010). For critical scholars, such as Kinloch (2011), the crux to a curative transformative education is supporting students and teachers to recognise local and global educational inequities, and to actively use their knowledge of community, language and literacies to create meaningful change in their lives.

At the heart of multicultural education is pluralism: multiculturalism, multiple perspectives, and multiple voices as important components of the work. Multicultural education promotes justice, equity, and cultural democracy as fundamental tenets (Banks & Banks, 2004, p. xi). It is premised on the belief that culture, which is multifaceted, complex, changing, and never neutral, is a major contributing factor to issues of schooling (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Lee, 2007). The perennial underachievement of culturally diverse students is an ongoing concern for educators at all levels (Howard, 2010).

Adopting a multicultural framework lens moves the discussion away from the 'binary' discourse that constructs Aboriginal learners as 'failures' or different from 'normal', a dichotomy which has plagued Australian education for the last 40 years (Osborne & Guenther, 2013). To move forward, the dialogue and the conception of a 'good education' needs to be reframed so that it matches the conception of the 'good' that is founded on Aboriginal perspectives, beliefs and aspirations (Nakata, 2001; Osborne & Guenther, 2013) rather than simply adopting 'mainstream' standards, pedagogies and curriculums for all

learners.

The voices of the Northern Territory's Aboriginal teacher workforce are under-represented, yet essential for the broader conversation about equity in NT schools. Critical multiculturalism provides a platform for considering their points of view and honouring their positions as educators in their classrooms and communities. The principles of multicultural theory are notably in line with the United Nations rights-based documents which Australia has signed up to. As you will see below, these are the documents which were appealed to when discussing the barriers to inclusion experienced in communities.

Methods

Situating the authors

In 2016 the group of authors and their colleagues met at Charles Darwin University in Darwin. Bea was the lecturer for a week-long intensive unit on Inclusive Education. Bertram, Kial, Melanie, Edwina, Rachel, Marcus, Nikita and Anthony were pre-service teachers working in schools as assistant teachers and taking the unit as a part of their studies towards a *Bachelor of Education*. Leonard joined the authorship team to help with the analysis and writing. Leonard was also a teacher in one of these communities and taught some of these pre-service teachers when they were in primary school. Many of these pre-service teachers work at schools they themselves attended, and therefore have unique insights into the educational, language, and cultural context of these schools and the aspirations of their students and communities.

During time together in Darwin, we read and discussed the policy documents that shape inclusive education in Australian schools including those mentioned above. We reviewed example case studies and discussed students who were experiencing exclusion in the communities and schools in which these pre-service teachers worked. As a group we generated and discussed issues based on observed and lived experiences.

As a part of the unit requirement, pre-service teachers completed two assignments. One of these assignments asked them to identify barriers to learning for students in their community. We defined inclusive education broadly to include all student groups that were not being served well within the current system. The assignment required pre-service teachers to consider the Australian policy documents that would support more inclusive practices and justify their proposed solutions. This paper was written as a co-constructed work between the primary authors and the pre-service teachers. Not all pre-service teachers chose to be co-authors. Some selected instead to sign a talent release to approve use of their work in this paper. The identified barriers to inclusion and solutions presented in this paper come from the collection of completed assignments.

Analysis

Assignments were imported into NVivo and analysed thematically (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011). Codes were developed iteratively, by highlighting key quotes, ideas and themes and revising, and solidifying or expanding categories with each read through. Coding was conducted in a manner similar to that of a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The assignments included in this analysis revealed the following major themes (in order of frequency): Attendance, hearing impairment, culture, speech and language issues, and lack of resources.

These themes will be explained and expanded on in the results section. These themes do not appear in the text in order of frequency; instead they are presented in a way that best supports the connection of ideas across the themes because the themes are intertwined. For example: students might spend more time out bush as a solution to issues of attendance, but to do this there is a need for better access to resources (e.g. new school buses).

An initial draft of the paper was completed by Bea and sent out to co-authors for review and feedback. Revisions were then made by Bea and Leonard.

The communities

Growing Our Own is a collaborative partnership between Charles Darwin University and Catholic Education NT, which is designed to support Aboriginal teaching assistants in acquiring their teaching degree. Each of the pre-service teacher co-authors work in one of four communities: Bathurst Island, Katherine, Daly River, or Santa Teresa. These communities are locally distinct, with different population sizes and histories, as well as varying cultural heterogeneity, practices, and languages.

Wurrumiyanga is a community on Bathurst Island, which is one of the two Tiwi islands north of Darwin. The community has a population of around 1,500 people (ABS, 2016), and was described as 85% Tiwi and 15% non-Tiwi people.

Katherine, has a population of around 6,300 people (ABS, 2016) with a mix, predominantly, of Aboriginal (~25%) and non-Aboriginal and Defense Force families. There are various languages spoken in the community, including Malay, Sri-Lankan, Nepalese, Aboriginal English and Kriol, as well as many others.

Naiiyu in the Daly River area has a population of 450 people where 86% are Aboriginal (RAHC, 2010). St Francis Xavier school was established in 1956 and the area has a history of Catholic missionaries.

Santa Teresa, 80 kilometres south-east of Alice Springs, has a population of 500 people, of whom 90% are Aboriginal (ABS, 2016). The community is very proud of the home language which is Eastern Arrente. There are two qualified Arrente teachers that teach the language to each class for two hours a week.

Results: Barriers to inclusion

Attendance

Attendance was the most frequent issue raised as a barrier to educational inclusion for Aboriginal students in these discussions and the subsequent assignments. Attendance is a broad umbrella category for the more specific concerns brought up in pre-service teacher assignments. Two main attendance issues were identified. First, students did not show up at school for a variety of reasons; and second, school policies relating to behaviour result in a high frequency of school suspensions for some students. Most of the assignments focused on how to address the second issue.

In defining the issues of attendance in one community, several factors that impact school attendance were listed. These included:

- Students not getting up early enough for school.
- Students often don't have food options at home, and because food is not available throughout the day at the school canteen, students go to the local take-away when they are hungry, making them late for school or missing class.
- When students fight in the community during out-of-school hours, this impacts on their willingness to come to school the next day because they feel safer at home where they do not have to see the individuals they are fighting with, who will likely be at school.
- When students "misbehave badly" they get suspended from school, which decreases attendance and a student's ability to get an education.

Several pre-service teachers discussed the way teachers and administrators often deal with behavioural issues by using suspension or exclusion from special activities, such as bush excursions and school trips, to discipline students for their behavior at school. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of

the Child states that “all children have the right to a primary education, which should be free. Discipline in schools must respect children’s dignity and their rights” (United Nations Child Rights, 1989, Article 28), this quote led pre-service teachers to question and discuss whether the current practice of regularly excluding some students respects those students’ right to access education.

Another pre-service teacher noted, “we have three main [school] rules: Stay Safe, Learn Every Day, and Respect Everyone. These are good rules. The learning every day rule is about student’s learning every day. But why do we punish students by taking away their learning?” It was suggested that instead of suspension, students could be sent to detention after school and not be excluded from everyday classroom activities.

Another difficulty around attendance concerned a situation where one school had established a room for children with special needs. This was defined as a “safe and engaging place for students needing inclusion support.” However, the space was so enticing that students began to request and demand to go there, and they sometimes misbehaved in the hope of being sent there. The use of this classroom as an alternative ‘chill out’ or ‘time out’ space for students needing behavioural support had become a much-coveted destination. It was proposed that there be a serious revision of the curriculum to ensure that students are interested in engaging with the learning occurring in the mainstream classroom. Further, the special education room was perceived as being an inappropriate destination for students who were misbehaving.

The pre-service teachers writing about this topic were extremely concerned about the impact of poor attendance on learning. It was suggested that perhaps mental health problems related to community-wide issues, may be impacting on students’ ability to attend, and fully engage with their schooling. This pre-service teacher recommended more teacher training to help specialise some of the learning programs, making sure the creation and implementation of Individualised Education Plans promoted “maximizing academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.” Another of the pre-service teachers proposed, more broadly, that reducing staff turn-over would support solid teacher-student relationships and increase community and family involvement in the school. This would be another way to support overall student well-being and help to address the wider issue of attendance.

Overall, the pre-service students presented thoughtful solutions to a complex problem. The issues described around attendance, behaviour, suspension and expulsion are complicated and necessarily balance the well-being of the individual with the well-being of the school community. But the themes in the solutions were clear: students might be more willing to come to school and have greater motivation to remain in the classroom if their education was more interesting and perhaps more culturally relevant to their lives.

Further, student behaviour should not be dealt with by expelling or suspending students. The solution will likely be found at the intersection of school and community interests and come from robust relationships between educators and community members committed to the well-being of the community. Pre-service teachers resoundingly suggested that families need to be incorporated into planning to address issues of student attendance. It was noted that, “community and family involvement ... will help support and benefit the students learning abilities and eventually will help with their behaviour; especially when you have elders coming in and working with the students with their wellbeing and giving them some sense of belonging.”

Culture

Culture barriers are discussed after attendance because three of the four papers that addressed culture and raised concerns about cultural exclusion did so in tandem with concerns about attendance. The acknowledgement of local culture and the appropriate consideration of culture in the classroom are themes that thread their way through every assignment, although the assignments shared in this section were quite explicit about their concerns as related to educational exclusion. For example, one of the pre-service teachers stated,

Some students don't know much about their culture because of their learning too much English and not much of Tiwi in school...our students seem to forget who they are. We need to focus our student's learning and what subject they can understand that relate to culture.

Reportedly, Aboriginal students are not being encouraged to use language and customs of their family while at school as the language spoken is not understood by most staff. Also, that there are issues with teaching staff (non-Aboriginal teachers or outsiders) not understanding skin groups and cultural issues that play out in classrooms when teachers are grouping students. For example, mixed gender groupings can be a significant issue when students are over 15 years old, due to complex family/community relationships that are often overlooked. Issues of modesty and respect that impact the teacher-student and teacher-community relationships are imperative for optimal learning in the classroom.

Assignments were rife with concern about cultural transmission in the community. For example, "the school should include more Tiwi culture because, as far as I'm concerned, we are starting to lose our language, dance, dream-time stories, sacred sites and not knowing where our traditional country is located."

There were calls from pre-service teachers for increased cultural training of new teachers to their community, both around specific cultural knowledge (e.g. skin groups) and local language knowledge. To justify their arguments, they pointed to documents including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which stated "Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems, and literatures" (United Nations General Assembly, 2007, Article 13.1, p. 7).

Recommendations also included a call for more arts, music, drama and science, including student learning about nature and the local environment. These suggestions intuit that culturally and locally relevant pedagogical activities will bolster students' cultural awareness and knowledge; increase the level of interest in learning for some students; and make school a place where students want to be, and thus improve attendance.

Access to resources

Access to resources was identified as a major barrier to inclusion for Aboriginal students in one of the assignments and was listed as a minor theme in several other assignments. One example of this form of exclusion concerned teachers requiring students to complete their homework using the internet. This was viewed as a barrier to inclusion because many students did not have internet access after school hours:

Students who don't have the privilege of having accessible resources at home are being disadvantaged, in particular those students who speak English as their second language, students who live away from home (boarding), and those students whose parents/guardians aren't equipped with the educational resources required to help their child.

Although the issue of access to resources was less explicit in the assignments compared to other themes, several solutions were posited. These included: better educational programming and accountability with the resources necessary for all students to succeed. It was also suggested that an after-school homework centre located in the school might provide a solution to the issue of students accessing resources to complete their homework. Other assignments alluded to the need for a new school bus or new sports equipment for more participatory activities such as time out bush. Once again, it was suggested that these types of activities might help encourage students to come to school and participate in learning experiences and thus they would have a positive impact on attendance.

Hearing impairment

Hearing impairment and the subsequent impact on student learning was the second most prevalent topic presented in this series of assignments and was raised by pre-service teachers in three of the four communities. Like the issue of attendance, there was variability in this category, but the concerns were primarily focused on the high rates of hearing impairment in Aboriginal populations, and whether hearing impairment was being addressed at a school and/or community level. It was notable that pre-service teachers drew on quotes and ideas from a large variety of policy documents that supported their ideas about inclusive learning for students with hearing impairment.

The issues brought forth in the assignments regarding hearing loss as a barrier to inclusive education included:

- Better identification and early treatment of otitis media to mitigate the impact of ear infections on student's emergent language and literacy skills. As well as regular hearing tests held at least once a year.
- Teachers need additional training to design learning programs specifically for learners with hearing impairment.
- Teachers need to consistently use the technology available in classrooms, for example, the Frequency Modulation (FM) system, which amplifies the teacher's voice for students with hearing impairment as this would enhance the auditory experience for learners.
- A culture of acceptance around hearing impairment needs to be nurtured to ensure students don't feel ostracised by their hearing impairment or having to wear hearing aids.
- In the same way that teachers should not regard using the FM system as optional, students should view their hearing aids as mandatory and must always be encouraged to wear their hearing aids.
- There is a need for better communication between families, the education system and health teams to make sure the school is supported to work with students who have hearing loss.

Speech and language issues

Speech and language issues were another theme that appeared in these assignments in relation to exclusion, and very often in relation to students with hearing impairment. However, it was noted that many students at these schools are learning Standard Australian English (SAE) as a second language, and only have exposure to SAE at school. This impacts students as there are difficulties in navigating a curriculum when the student is still learning the language of instruction.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that "children have the right to learn and use the language and customs of their families, whether or not these are shared by the majority of people in the country where they live, as long as this does not harm others" (United Nations Child Rights, 1989, Article 30). Further, The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Aboriginal People also stated children are "to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture, provided in their own language" (Article 14.3, p. 7). Reportedly, some schools make provisions for students to learn their home language but not across the entire curriculum (e.g. local language is not used in Math or Science) which impacts student learning, particularly when students have special needs or hearing loss. However, most schools in the NT adopt an English only approach, with an English-speaking curriculum taught by English (only) speaking teachers (Freeman & Wigglesworth, in press)

Recommendations to address the barrier of speech and language issues included:

- Resourcing and support (including professional development) for teachers delivering programs to Aboriginal students who speak English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EALD).
- Professional development about working with EALD learners, as well as cultural immersion and accelerated literacy programming.

- Teaching teachers some simple words and phrases in the local Aboriginal language before they start teaching children. This would help to support the inclusion of students who do not yet understand English.
- Teaching literacy in both English and Aboriginal language so students are not just bilingual but biliterate.
- Training more Aboriginal language speakers as quality teachers.

Discussion

This paper has presented issues that appear to apply to NT schools generally, such as attendance, and the degree to which Aboriginal language and culture are included and used for learning in the classroom. Attendance was the prominent topic and perhaps this reflects the frequency of the issue in the contemporary public discourse. Educational authorities often cite poor attendance rates as the primary reason why so many Aboriginal students do not achieve the same learning outcomes as non-Aboriginal students (Osborne & Guenther, 2013). While recognising the common sense in their argument that regular attendance is vitally important to receiving the full benefits of what schools have to offer, Lee, Fasoli, Ford, Stephenson, and McInerney (2014) assert that school attendance “is not, and never will be, the whole story” (p. 184). Proponents of ‘poor attendance’ as the sole determinant of poor outcomes tend to assume that the goals and aspirations of Aboriginal communities mirror the values of urban mainstream society and that they aspire to achieve the same formal (Western) education and employment outcomes (Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

Nakata’s (1991, 2001) position is that governments, policy makers and researchers should not view Aboriginal learners as a homogeneous group, and that it is crucial for Aboriginal education policies, curriculums and teaching approaches to reflect the positioning of the individual Aboriginal learner’s needs. Further Nakata (2001) believes that policy makers must recognise that Aboriginal students are positioned within the education system on a multiplicity of socio-cultural markers, such as socio-economic, geographical, language, historical and other intersections of the learner’s background, and that these are rarely predictable or predetermined. This article presents the views and educational experiences of remote Aboriginal pre-service teachers in an effort to expose inequity, in the hope that future programs and policies are better tailored to meet the specific needs of these Aboriginal learners.

Nakata (2001, 2007) contends that the linear view of transitioning Aboriginal learners, which currently dominates educational policies and practices, positions the teaching of local Aboriginal knowledge as part of simple early learning experiences. Therefore, as Aboriginal students’ progress through their schooling and higher level skills are acquired, the current education system “moves Aboriginal students away from their life learning context and students lose interest, parents and communities worry about cultural maintenance and outcomes” (Nakata, 2001, p. 7). These same concerns emerged in our discussions and assignments about barriers to inclusion for Aboriginal learners. Nakata (2001) states that he is not saying that an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal learners should be determined solely by its proximity to the lifeworld of the Aboriginal learner. Instead, it should “begin there and extend the Aboriginal learner in the intersections with non-Aboriginal ways of knowing, ways that will produce comparable outcomes, useful and relevant to their present and future but able to maintain the continuity with the past” (Nakata, 2001, p. 8).

The primary goal of multicultural education is to implement a model of education that accommodates the various skill sets, talents, and knowledge that learners bring with them into classrooms (Lee, 2007). Doing so means that educators openly provide all students with ample opportunities to learn, to acknowledge their agency (Lee, 2007), to attain academic achievement (Howard, 2010), and to question inequitable, and oppressive educational structures (Gay, 2010). This work calls for greater cultural inclusion of local languages and traditions, and for education to be prepared in partnership with families and community members to ensure the education delivered truly caters for students’ diverse learning needs.

Conclusion

A multicultural society is founded on the principles of respect and tolerance of difference. The pursuit of equal outcomes (equality) views difference negatively, and students who don't conform to the standards as problematic. Critical multicultural education fundamentally values difference. It is one possible lens for considering teaching and learning practices with diverse student populations. It is also a mindset for engaging learners and drawing their attention to the power and autonomy they must create positive change in their communities.

When we approach remote education using a critical multicultural education lens, we reveal the multifaceted needs and strengths of individual students. With this awareness we can truly start to ask the right questions and begin the provision of inclusive education in partnership with communities, to work towards shared educational aspirations.

This work is not intended to suggest that the issues raised are simple or easy to fix. Indeed, they are complex, and reflect an enduring history of institutionalised racism. The barriers and proposed solutions presented in this paper simply provide insight into the thorny issues of providing inclusive education when faced with the constraints and reality of schools, administrative processes and remote communities. We are appealing for a move away from simple problematization and urban-centric approaches to education that currently predominates.

It is important to recognise that marginalised students, whether they have been excluded from school because of their behaviour or missed important learning due to a significant hearing impairment, need to receive a more equitable education so they too can flourish. If our research and teaching practices are interwoven and designed around our students, then our teaching and learning should reflect how people grow, learn, and change in sociocultural spaces that support critical thinking, diversity, difference, multilingualism, innovation, and authentic literacy engagements, to create “pedagogies of possibility” (Kinloch, 2010, p.192). This should even be the case for those students who challenge us with their words and actions. This should even be the case for those who come to our classrooms with a myriad of underserved needs, whether developmental delays, chronic ear infections, or other issues likely to impact on their educational journey.

This paper is a call for Australian educators to nurture, promote and develop the myriad of talents and possibilities our students bring to the classroom. Valuing diversity and difference as positive attributes, means the outcome of success, or excellence (as aspired to in The Melbourne Declaration, 2008) looks different based on our students' individual abilities, strengths, challenges and aspirations. We are championing equitable education for all. We urge educators and politicians to respect, privilege and harness difference, to truly give our students a fair go.

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