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Aboriginal Voices Project, Cathie Burgess, Closing the Gap, Education policy, Indigenous education policy, Indigenous students, teaching Indigenous students

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# Effective teaching methods that work for Indigenous students: latest research

By **Cathie Burgess**

What does effective teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students look like? Thousands of research studies have been dedicated to finding answers to this question. But much



of what we think we know, or hear, about Indigenous education remains mired in myths and legends.

Governments have been surprisingly frank about the failure of their [Closing The Gap](#) policies to deliver better health, education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The search for better ways continues.

My colleagues and I are particularly interested in looking for what works in Aboriginal education, and most importantly, how do we know what works?

As part of the larger [‘Aboriginal Voices’ project](#) we decided to analyse research studies on Aboriginal education from 2006-2017. We carried out several systematic literature reviews following [rigorous and replicable protocols](#) across a range of key issues.

The review I want to tell you about is one that looked for evidence of pedagogies that engage, support and improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous students.

This review sorted through approximately 2000 research studies and, after applying the systematic review inclusion/exclusion protocols, analysed the remaining 53 research studies.

So, what did we find?

### **Most studies are localised small-scale qualitative case studies focused on engagement**

Most research studies were localised small-scale qualitative case studies producing evidence of successful programs that engaged and/or supported Indigenous students in the classroom and in many cases, these were the aims of the program. The assumption appears to be that if Indigenous students are engaged in their learning then their educational outcomes will improve but without empirical evidence to support this, this can only be considered as conjecture.

### **Wholesale literacy and numeracy programs where Indigenous students are a subset**

Eighteen research studies identified pedagogical approaches for specific skills such as literacy and numeracy revealing mixed results in terms of success. In many of these studies, Indigenous students were a subset of a larger group usually connected by socio-economic status (SES), achievement levels and location. Any successes reported in these programs occurred for all students and therefore did not shed light on any specific pedagogical approaches that improved Indigenous student outcomes.

Not surprisingly research studies that focus on practical skill improvements like literacy and numeracy tend to receive large-scale funding as results are more readily quantifiable and reportable in terms of government policy priorities. Moreover, programmatic approaches to literacy



and numeracy appear to have become the default approach for Aboriginal student learning in preparation for vocational pathways.

### Specific pedagogies identified as effective

Yes we did find 21 studies of pedagogies identified as effective in improving Aboriginal student engagement, support and /or educational outcomes.

Most described effective, innovative pedagogies such as

- [‘Pedagogies of wonder’](#). This involves adults listening to the wonder of the children about their own history, culture and context and trusting children to research this rich resource.
- [Generative pedagogies](#) Here, culturally safe spaces were created for Indigenous girls to engage with their everyday experiences of oppression, through writing.
- [Place-based pedagogies](#) (also [here](#)) that take students out of the classroom and onto ‘country’ and involve Rangers, teachers and community members in a collaborative approach to teaching and learning were successful in engaging students .
- [pedagogies prioritising local Aboriginal voices](#) that involve listening to voices in the community and understanding the values and cultural elements that inform students in their engagement with a formal education context.

These teaching methods engaged and supported Aboriginal students rather than ‘improved educational outcomes’ and while it could be argued that culturally responsive approaches such as these create conditions for improving educational outcomes, there was no empirical evidence to make this causal connection.

The seminal extensive research project [Systemic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement in NSW public schools \(SIPA\)](#) provides an exception. While Aboriginal students were a subset of a larger group, researchers focussed on results for specific groups, coding and measuring student assessment tasks utilising the [NSW Quality Teaching Framework \[QTF\]](#).

In terms of outcomes, researchers provided solid evidence that high quality assessment tasks not only improved all students results but [contributed to closing the gap](#) between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. While not identifying *specific pedagogies* to improve educational outcomes, they noted *pedagogical approaches* that contributed to poor outcomes particularly for Aboriginal and low SES students such as ‘defensive teaching’, low expectations and a focus on behaviour management rather than effective teaching and learning of curriculum content.

### Contributing factors to effective teaching

Many of the studies [43] discussed pedagogies in relation to other contributing factors to effective teaching such as student engagement, teacher professional learning and curriculum.



Engagement strategies identified the importance of:

- individually paced learning,
- culturally safe learning environments,
- providing transport, food and community-based staff working in the school,
- opportunities for Aboriginal student voices,
- local community involvement in the school,
- teacher understanding about their students 'out-of-school' lives, and
- school as a place of belonging and relevance.

Teacher professional learning included the need for:

- increased teacher confidence and efficacy through actively learning about local Aboriginal culture, history and the impact of colonization,
- a shift from behaviour management to subject knowledge,
- time and resources to adequately reflect on and improve their practice, and
- ongoing engagement with Aboriginal parents and communities.

Students and parents highlighted the importance of:

- culture,
- positive relationships,
- needing to learn about the literacy demands of schools and how to code-switch between home and school,
- support for student behavior,
- schools and teachers rejecting deficit views of Aboriginal people, and
- affirming Aboriginal student's cultural identity.

### **Knowing the community is critical**

While only 14 research studies focussed on context, most studies referred to this as an important consideration especially in remote and very remote schools. This suggests that the issues for students and the challenges for teachers are largely context dependent and so critical and nuanced understandings of each particular community are crucial. It also points to the invisibility of urban-based students and communities. If a study was conducted in an urban area, the location was not mentioned or considered a factor in the study. Given that urban Indigenous populations are increasing exponentially, this highlights a concerning gap in the research design and priorities.

### **Deficit thinking**



Concern about school and teacher deficit thinking about Aboriginal peoples and cultures that also appear to permeate policy and practice, was evident in a number of studies, some of which contextualized this within ongoing issues of race and racism. Some studies also critically analysed the construction, problematisation and reproduction of knowledge noting that Aboriginal aspirations were not often included in definitions of what success might look like for these students and their communities, or how it might be measured.

### **The challenges are many and the answers complex**

Consequently, while these research studies contribute to the conversation about 'what works' for Indigenous students, there certainly needs to be an evidence-based systematic approach to developing pedagogical approaches to improve Aboriginal student outcomes. In saying this, the combination of diverse Aboriginal contexts each of which are embedded in local place and knowledges, and the complexity of 'measuring' pedagogies given the multitude of complex, layered and nuanced variables that impact on the teaching/learning process, makes this an extremely challenging task.

### **Need for a national vision**

What we found throughout this review and the other systematic reviews conducted in this project, is what is missing or under-researched more than what was discovered or proven. It is clear to us that a national vision is needed. This vision needs to decolonize the parochial targets, outcomes and obsession with 'measurement' that currently restrains Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and policy makers working together on the holistic project of improving Aboriginal student outcomes.

The Aboriginal Voices project will continue this work by developing culturally responsive approaches to schooling informed by local Aboriginal students and their families, who continually foreground the significance of Country, culture, language and identity to their success, emphasising the importance of success as 'Aboriginal'.

*Dr Cathie Burgess is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Sydney currently teaching and coordinating Aboriginal Studies curriculum courses, Aboriginal Community Engagement and the Master of Education: Leadership in Aboriginal Education. She has extensive teaching and leadership experience in secondary schools with expertise in Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal education, and implementing innovative literacy strategies. Cathie's research involves community-led initiatives positioning Aboriginal cultural educators as experts through projects such as **Learning from Country in the City, Aboriginal Voices: Insights into Aboriginal Education, Community-Led Research, The Smith Family's Learning for Life program and the Redfern Aboriginal Family Cultural Program.***

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## 2 thoughts on “Effective teaching methods that work for Indigenous students: latest research”

**Bill Blaikie**

April 15, 2019 at 7:37 am

There still seems to be an underlying presumption that the settler education and culture are more desirable than various Aboriginal approaches and cultures. Perhaps we need to put ourselves firmly in the shoes of the learners. Mary Graham's essay on Aboriginal philosophy is a good starting point. Google it. After several readings I'm still reconstructing my thinking...

**Catherine Burgess**

April 15, 2019 at 9:00 am

Thanks Bill – i look forward to reading this essay

Comments are closed.

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