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Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) for Indigenous education

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Research Brief

What is the problem?

The 2019 Mparntwe Education Declaration and the 2020 Closing the Gap Report refresh both signal the importance of (and links between) culture, wellbeing and holistic development for Indigenous education. Yet, many education authorities continue to rely on individual student test results to make judgements about what works and associated funding decisions.

Likewise, key priorities identified by the Education Council and Indigenous groups – such as nurturing emotional, cultural and social wellbeing, and the importance of reciprocity and relationships – are often poorly translated into policy and practice.

These concerns, and the ongoing failure of the Closing the Gap strategy to alleviate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, prompted Dr Kevin Lowe and Dr Cathie Burgess to lead a team of academics to systematically review a decade of research across 10 topic areas in Indigenous education to find out ‘what works’ and how do we know.

This review – the Aboriginal Voices project – forms the evidence base of the Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project.

Aboriginal Voices key findings

The Aboriginal Voices project found there is often a disconnect between what teachers think they practice and what they are doing in the classroom or in their relationships with Indigenous students. It determined an array of long-term issues affecting the underachievement of Indigenous students in Australia that need to be simultaneously addressed.

It also identified what is working well; where teachers are supported to engage in robust professional learning, and families and communities are meaningfully involved in the life of schools and decision-making – which has informed a set of solutions that will be tested in the CNS project.

The Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project

The Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) project is part of a collaborative research study investigating strategies to improve teaching and learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It aims to empower the community, school leaders and teachers to refashion education with an emphasis on establishing meaningful relationships and connections with Country and localised Indigenous knowledges, histories and experiences.

Through simultaneous practice and research, CNS will identify challenges faced by schools and teachers, the key factors needed to ensure sustainable school reform to support positive outcomes for Indigenous students, and successful direct and indirect strategies for facilitating change.



Diagram: Factors and strategies under investigation

Aim of the CNS project

This project will deliver a school-based approach to improving schooling for Indigenous students, designed in schools with local Indigenous educators and Elders leading and working with teachers and school leaders.

The overarching project aims are to:

- **A1.** Improve teachers' knowledge and professional practices in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- **A2.** Establish a sustainable base for the long-term collaboration between Indigenous families, communities and schools.
- **A3.** Establish a whole-school model of schooling that supports the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students.

What we are doing about it

The project is a collaborative undertaking involving local Indigenous communities, school educators and NSW Dept of Education, and researchers to establish a whole-of-school professional model to support the improvement of Indigenous students' experiences of schooling.

The study involves the learning communities connected with eight schools in NSW, working to establish the 'culturally nourishing' schooling model as central to their current strategic planning and operations. The model is a research-informed framework developed and currently piloted by the researchers. It is designed to improve the academic achievements of Indigenous learners while concurrently fostering a strong and healthy cultural identity grounded in the local context.

Research outcomes

The outcomes of this research will be to:

- Establish a model of professional learning that improves teachers' knowledge and professional practice.
- Use evidence-based strategies to support sustained educative partnerships toward improved outcomes.
- Evaluate a responsive model of culturally nourishing pedagogy and curriculum.
- Develop professional resources for teachers that centre Indigenous knowledges, practices and aspirations in curriculum and pedagogy to support the implementation of the CNS model.

Research questions

- **RQ1:** To what extent do the CNS professional learning strategies impact on teacher professional knowledge and pedagogic capacity?
- **RQ2:** What strategies are seen to support the development of productive and sustained educative partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities?
- **RQ3:** In what ways do the CNS strategies (separately and collectively) impact on the schooling experiences of Indigenous students?

School interventions

The Culturally Nourishing Schooling approach engages teachers, leaders, cultural mentors, and other interested stakeholders in the following suite of five activities.

- **1. Learning from Country (Term 1)** – Two to three days of learning led by the local NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) members and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff and Cultural Mentors. This learning centres Country and foregrounds the importance of understanding learning in a place. As knowledges are shared and exchanged during these days (and beyond), leaders and teachers are encouraged and supported to take up opportunities to engage with Community and learn more about the strengths and lives of their students, their families and Communities, and to think about Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being.
- **2. Curriculum Workshops (Term 2)** – A two-day collaborative workshop to engage teachers in thinking about curriculum frameworks to audit current planning practices and plans, and to inform their curriculum planning for future teaching cycles. The focus is on centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and ways of thinking, being and doing in curriculum and pedagogical practices. Cultural Mentors are made available as facilitators and collaborators to provide expert advice.
- **3. Professional Learning Conversations (Terms 2-4)** – Occurring approximately six to eight times per year, or as planned by school staff involved. Most schools start in late Term 2 and schedule approximately one per month (excluding school holidays). During these conversations, teachers, leaders, researchers and Cultural Mentors read articles, discuss concepts related to pedagogy and curriculum choices focused toward improving schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and connect this to their own local contexts, practices, and ways of working.

- **4. Culturally Nourishing Pedagogies (Terms 3-4)** – Learning is planned and structured to suit the specific circumstances of each local school context. At least one cycle or burst will usually be completed in each of two terms (so that minimum of two complete bursts or cycles are completed each year). The Cultural Mentors are directly involved in the teachers' learning as partners with teachers. Schools may decide to do more than two bursts or cycles as appropriate.
- **5. Cultural Mentoring (Terms 1-4)** – Cultural Mentors may be involved in each of the other four strategies within each school. In relation to Culturally Nourishing Pedagogies, Cultural Mentors are involved in developing, observing, delivering, and reflecting on teaching and learning practices with teachers and leaders in classrooms. The point is to engage Cultural Mentors collaboratively in the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that occurs in classrooms at the school and work with teachers during planning and reflective sessions outside of the classroom.

The bottom line

The benefits of this practice/research study into improving teachers' capacity to develop CNS practices is immeasurable for Indigenous students in particular, and all school stakeholders and Australia more generally. While acknowledging that this is a long-term project, the chief investigators are committed to working and researching with teachers and school leaders in each study site to demonstrate the potential of the CNS program to address the issues impacting on the educational opportunities of Indigenous students. The benefits in addressing these hurdles to students' success are economic, social, political and in the end, moral.

It is incumbent on the state and its mandated agencies to leave no stone unturned in supporting programs that meet the needs of Indigenous students through supported professional learning with principals and teachers to affect the outcomes of the CNS project. This project has been conceptualised as a practice/research study that intends to research all the key elements in this program. It is the intention of this study to build a robust body of research to demonstrate the capacity of the program to affect teachers' beliefs and values about Indigenous student learning, their impact on changing teaching practices, and the consequent effects on student achievement.

Once this body of research is made public, we will work with our partner organisations to promote the CNS model more broadly to other educational jurisdictions.

About the Researchers



Kevin Lowe

Kevin Lowe (kevin.lowe@unsw.edu.au) is a Gubbi Gubbi man from southeast Queensland. He is a Scientia Indigenous Fellow at UNSW, working on a community and school focused research project on developing a model of sustainable improvement in Aboriginal education. Kevin has had experience in education as a teacher, administrator and lecturer. He has expertise in working with Aboriginal community organisations on establishing Aboriginal language policy and school curriculum implementation. Recently Kevin has worked with colleagues to review research across key areas of schooling and established the Aboriginal Voices a broad-base, holistic project which is developing a new pedagogic framework for teachers.



Greg Vass

Greg's work in the Sociology of Education is concerned with social and Indigenous perspectives in education. His research interests are focused on investigating relationships between policy enactment, and pedagogic/curricula performative race-making practices and inequalities. This work explores how discrimination and privilege are connected to subjectivities that continue to rely on racialised social scripts and everyday practices. Building on his experiences as a high school teacher, central to his work are concerns with how educators can work towards disrupting the reproduction of raced hierarchies and inequalities within educational settings.



Cathie Burgess

Associate Professor Cathie Burgess lectures in Aboriginal Studies and education courses in the Sydney School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Her extensive expertise in this area is built on twenty-five years teaching and leadership experience in secondary schools in Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal curriculum and pedagogies, and innovative literacy strategies to improve student outcomes. As Aboriginal Studies Association NSW President, Cathie maintains strong connections with schools across the state as well as advocating for Aboriginal Studies at local and national levels through government submissions, speaking engagements and convening annual conferences for teachers, Aboriginal community consultants and students.



Annette Woods

Annette woods is a professor in the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). She is also a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. She researchers and teaches in social justice education and school reform; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; and literacies and digital literacies. She is currently involved in the Culturally Nourishing Schooling project, and also in research related to using students' home languages in school curriculum and pedagogy; investigating young children's representations of learning with technologies; a curriculum project investigating history and science teachers' engagements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content; and studies related to communication between parents, children, teachers and schools.



Andrew Martin

Andrew J. Martin, PhD, is Scientia Professor, Professor of Educational Psychology, and Chair of the Educational Psychology Research Group in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales, Australia. He specialises in motivation, engagement, achievement, and quantitative research methods.

Further details of his work can be found at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andrew-Martin-22>



Rose Amazan

Rose Amazan is a Lecturer in the School of Education at UNSW, Sydney. She has extensive experience working with low SES communities in Australia and internationally. Rose's expertise resides in two strands of research: Social justice in education/ pathways to educational equity and international education and development policy with an emphasis on gender. Rose's research, teaching, and service activities are motivated by her commitment to community development and creating equitable and safe environments for marginalised and disadvantaged communities.





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