

Affective response as a catalyst for reimagining curriculum and pedagogy for teaching of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority in Christian education

Majon Williamson-Kefu

Australian Education Research Organisation, Glen Esk, Qld
majon.williamson-kefu@edresearch.edu.au

John Guenther

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Batchelor, NT
john.guenther@batchelor.edu.au

Robyn Ober

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, Batchelor, NT
robyn.ober@batchelor.edu.au

Sam Osborne

University of South Australia, Mawson Lakes Campus, Mawson Lakes, SA
Samuel.Osborne@unisa.edu.au

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Abstract

In 2018, Australians Together commissioned research on a trial program designed to improve teachers' confidence in relation to teaching the Australian Curriculum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority. The research, led by the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, was designed to engage staff at two peri-urban independent schools who had participated in the professional learning, several months after they had taken part in an Australians Together 2-day workshop. Teachers described a strong affective response to the professional learning, which prompted them to engage more deeply

with the cross-curriculum priority and adapt new teaching resources and approaches to their classrooms. In this article we explore these outcomes but pose the question: 'Is affective response sufficient?'. Based on the research, we suggest additional steps that could be taken to further extend the impact beyond classroom actions.

Introduction

Australians Together is a not for profit organisation that is working to create new narratives to "help non-Indigenous people learn the true story of our shared history, understand how it's still having an impact today and imagine new ways to live together more respectfully" (Australians Together, 2020). Fiona Partridge (2020, p. 27) highlights that Christian teachers "are called by the very words of Jesus Christ to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and to love our neighbour as ourselves

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(Mark 12:30-31)", and emphasises that "That surely includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people". As such, Christian teachers should be actively working to enhance the ways in which they work to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to ensure First Nations students can see themselves and their cultures reflected in the curriculum, as well as enabling all students to better understand more of the histories and cultures being lived and experienced in this country and by their neighbours.

As teachers it is critical to understand the potential impact genuine engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and content could have on shaping a new national narrative towards reconciliation, another biblical mandate (2 Cor 5:18). Similarly, we take the apostle Paul's normative statement of "there is neither Jew nor Gentile" (Gal 3:27) as an expression of contemporary anti-racism (Ash et al., 2017).

A significant part of Australians Together's work is to support teachers and schools in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives through Professional Learning (PL) Workshops and curriculum resources. The PL programs were designed—according to Intergroup Contact Theory (Christ & Kauff, 2019; Mazziotta, et al., 2011; Pettigrew, et al., 2011)—to build the capacity of teachers so that they can effectively and appropriately teach elements of the *Australian Curriculum*, particularly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority. Australians Together has developed resources and a learning framework around a set of five key ideas (Australians Together, 2017, p. 1)

1. *Our Cultures*—focuses on the importance of understanding one's own identity and culture and how that influences the way we see the world;
2. *The Wound*—explores the ongoing negative effects of colonisation;
3. *Our History*—tells stories that many Australians have never heard;
4. *Why Me?*—examines why this is relevant to every Australian; and
5. *My Response*—gives some guidelines for how to respond respectfully.

In 2018 Australians Together commissioned a team of researchers led by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE), to conduct a small research project in order to better understand how Australians Together's work with teachers is perceived and applied.

Methodology

Our study was based on qualitative methods drawing on an interpretive paradigm where responses were analysed through a critical transformative lens (Mertens 2009) in order to assess the impact of the Australians Together PL on teachers.

The research questions guiding the research are as follows:

1. What barriers/limitations/challenges do educators and school leaders face in applying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority through teaching and learning?
2. What are the outcomes (for teachers, students and schools) of a professional learning program designed to support teachers?
3. What new narratives and discourses emerge as a result of these outcomes (in the classroom, at leadership levels and at the system level)?
4. What evidence is there of changes towards an education that focuses on equity, justice, rights and reconciliation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

In this paper, we've added to this by posing the question, "Is affective response sufficient?" Specifically, we examine whether a teacher's affective response can be an effective catalyst for change in classroom practice. The primary aim of this project was to understand how non-Indigenous teachers can develop knowledge, skills and confidence to include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority from the *Australian Curriculum* in their pedagogy. Secondary to this aim was a need to understand and respond to teachers' need for resources and professional learning in a way that supports the application of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers—in particular those that call for skills to respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures with the aim of promoting reconciliation and strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017, Standards 2.4 and 1.4).

This small study involved nine teaching staff, five curriculum coordinators, mentors and school leaders, as well as one system level coordinator, in two Lutheran system schools in regional Victoria, Australia. One of the schools had no students who identified as Indigenous and the other had about 10. Both schools participated in PL in May 2018. Interviews and focus groups with participants were conducted in October 2018. The data was analysed

“Specifically, we examine whether a teacher's affective response can be an effective catalyst for change in classroom practice.”

using NVivo qualitative analysis software to identify themes emerging from the data, for each question we posed.

Ethical clearance was sought and approved through the AIATSIS (Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) Research Ethics Committee (HREC Reference Number: EO94-23072018).

Findings

The purpose of this paper is to explore how teachers' *affective*, or emotional, response to the PL resulted in tangible curriculum and pedagogical outcomes in their classrooms. The data set is interrogated to examine whether positive change extended beyond the classroom, something Australians Together aims to achieve, particularly focusing on evidence of new narratives. Discussion relates this into six themes that emerged from the data. Consideration includes teachers' affective responses to the PL, their reflexive responses, teachers' engagement with curriculum and planning, practical classroom applications and pedagogical responses. The schools are referred to as School 1 and School 2.

Affective response

There were many reports from respondents about the enthusiasm and excitement that people felt after participating in the professional learning workshop.

I think after the first day, we got in the car and we drove home and we were like 'this is incredible'. This is what's needed, this is what we need, this is what everyone needs.

Another commented on the experience as one of the best professional development experiences (PDs) she had attended:

It was a wonderful opportunity. In fact, I think... I came back and said it was probably one of the best PDs that I had attended in so much as being able to come back and actually do something to make a difference.

One respondent talked about being more 'comfortable' after the workshop:

It has certainly given me a little bit more of a confidence and a comfortable feeling in being able to deliver this part of the curriculum and through the program.

Another school leader, who was not able to attend all the time, made this observation:

I wasn't there full time. I do remember teachers leaving being very emotionally exhausted, so [staff member] left one of the meetings and she had to lead a meeting for the junior school and she just said my heart is full and troubled and my head is swimming with stuff.

The staff member provided her own reflection:

...just the information that was shared with us was quite full on and emotional and eye-opening and you know, made you sad, made you mad and I think yeah, my eyes were definitely opened.

The mix of mostly positive emotional responses described in the quotes above point to strong affective responses from participants. In many ways, the PL provoked and inspired participants. It made them feel more comfortable, more empathic and positive about their ability to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives as required by the cross-curriculum priority. The responses also point to a high level of engagement in the workshop process. There is, however, no discussion about confrontation, discomfort, shame, whiteness or niceness—research suggests that these more difficult topics need to be addressed to affect real change (Ohito, 2020). Similarly, there are no discussions that challenge teacher positioning in relation to Maudlin's (2014) sense of a "white hope", which problematises the reinscription and perpetuation of white privilege that occurs through an assumption that white people can transcend whiteness through its recognition and critique.

Reflexive response

The reflexive responses that emerged from the workshop are in part about the positioning of self differently as a result of the new knowledge and also about repositioning professional practice. In terms of personal impact one focus group respondent commented on how the material connected with her feelings—perhaps understanding what it would be like to walk in someone else's shoes:

For me, it was like wow, it made me realise why things like Sorry Day, why it really was a big deal because it really highlighted to me the situations, how I would feel.

We note that the implied emphasis of the above quote is not on the teacher's personal involvement in Sorry Day, but in her understanding of what it might be like for 'the other'. The personal impact is also expressed in another workshop participant's 'emotional' reaction to the content:

I was very emotional and I went ... back home and I shared the whole story with my daughters and we all got very emotional about it and that actually helped me understand a lot, and what I did was the very next day after the session, I just poured it out on my kids in the class so 'lest I forget', you know?

“there are no discussions that challenge teacher positioning in relation to Maudlin's sense of a 'white hope'”

One of the exercises in the PL was planning for a unit of teaching and learning. The level of collective responsibility for the quality of the units is expressed in the following quote with references to 'we need', 'we can', 'we've always felt like that'. This indicates some of the repositioning that resulted at a professional level through the PL. The repositioning allows teachers to remain in control of the content they are teaching without becoming personally vulnerable.

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Posing hard questions, ... that they have to then take back and self-reflect on and say well maybe I've thought wrong, you know, I've been told the wrong thing”

I think when we would sit down and we'd get ready for these units, we would look at that and we'd all kind of be like 'this isn't great', this isn't a very good unit, you know, how can we improve it, you know, make it more engaging for the students and create more awareness and acknowledgment? I think we've always felt like that... we need to scrap it, we need to start again. This is, like it's not doing enough.

The teachers' newfound ability to ask questions and encourage their students to ask questions was also evident.

I think, [students] being able to ask those questions that maybe [we] were sitting on in the session. Is it the wrong thing to ask? We were encouraged to ask them anyway and there were some answers that weren't able to be given because they weren't sure or whatever, but I think it's the same with the students. They sit there and they're not sure and they hear things... They've got opinions... from their parents that they bring to the classroom...

The participants' experiences with their own questions, in some cases, caused them to reflect on how it might be for students. In some ways, this reflects a shift in pedagogical approach that sees the teacher as having to know and relay information, to one that knows how to ask questions and explore answers. Interestingly, these reflections did not extend to how this experience or questioning might be different when First Nations students are in the classroom.

The focus on understanding their thinking and how this affects teacher practice was reflected in feedback from focus group respondents who were reflecting on a unit they had just taught on the First Fleet and colonisation:

It may be a chance to reflect on their own thinking and why they think that way and has their thinking changed since...

Posing hard questions, hard thoughts that they have to then take back and self-reflect on and say well maybe I've thought wrong, you know, I've been told the wrong thing from the start.

These reflections suggest that an affective response did shape teacher practices. Participants

described experiences that could be labelled as epiphanic moments and needed to share those revelations with their family, colleagues and students. But we do not see evidence of a shift in values or a deepening of understanding in what it means to be a First Nations student in this educational context. This remains hidden.

Engagement with curriculum and planning

Beyond the affective and reflexive responses, one perceived benefit of the PL was that it fed directly into curriculum planning.

[The workshop was] thoroughly enjoyable for all of us and has since been enjoyable for [School 1] because... we did a presentation as part of a curriculum day recently and it just led to so many things like, you know, editing our scope and sequence for our integrated studies and having a real P-6 approach and I believe now that they're going to go beyond and go 7-9.

Another participant from School 2 stated:

Not only were we able to do that really deep level thinking of just the planning. We also learnt a lot about some extra things to add to our planning repertoire as well so that part of it was really well presented, the process was great.

Another participant commented on how it changed the way they approached the content of a unit. Note how this teacher from School 2 also connected the emotion and affective response (discussed earlier) with planning and classroom practice.

They explained why teachers and students should... share this information with others and then we made a connection with our cultures, the current cultures, how that history was brought into the modern society, how we can implement that and towards the end, [and] we were given the opportunity to put all that knowledge into our unit planner so we could see from the emotions, triggering emotions, to actually putting into our classroom practice through [a] unit planner.

So, the benefit of the PL was that it not only contributed to content, but it also connected that content with curriculum and pedagogy.

Practical classroom applications

The interview data provides numerous examples of ways that teachers responded to their learning in the classroom. One strategy that emerged was to shift the focus from delivering content to making the content engaging and relevant:

I just think I'm really excited in a way that we can deliver it to help the kids connect. I think that wasn't there, it was 'this is what we're teaching you' and that

was it but now, 'this is your history, this is about you and this is why this happened and what can we do about it?'

The use of the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia (Horton, 1996) as a teaching tool was also enthusiastically embraced: "They [students] just love the language map, they do. They just love it."

Another activity incorporated into classroom practice was reflection on five aspects of culture based on Paulson and Brett's (2013) Five Smooth Stones:

So, each learning outcome has learning intentions, success criteria then a brief about what the lesson, or some guidelines for what the lesson can contain and the five stones reflection is an amazing activity.

Another commented on enriched learning for students:

I felt like it was going to definitely enrich the year four Aboriginal studies unit, where before it had been focused on a lot of important things like dance and art and that sort of thing but not getting into the meat of it I guess, of the history and how your history shapes people. It can't not shape people and the way they think.

One teacher commented on a USB drive that participants were given, which included a range of resources they could apply:

This USB is the best thing. It's got so [many] rich resources and stories and clips. It's so comprehensive, it's like it's one of the best teaching tools I've ever seen so that was fantastic.

The above responses suggest that the PL activities, tools and resources were directly transferrable to the participants' classrooms.

Pedagogical responses

Related to the application of workshop activities in the classroom was a corresponding change in the pedagogical approach used by teachers. Helping students connect with the content was a key benefit for some teachers: "*I just think I'm really excited in a way that we can deliver it to help the kids connect*".

We noted earlier that the reflexive response of PL facilitators was reflected in the way that questions were used to elicit responses from workshop participants as a way of breaking down opinions and in turn opening up alternative possibilities in the minds of the participants. Participant teachers then used this strategy to encourage their students to ask questions.

[You] break [those opinions] down completely but you've got to have those [points of view], if you're

confident enough to share and teach that then they're able to ask those questions and maybe change opinions.

The level of critical thinking applied to pedagogy was evident too. Noting that School 2 has a strong migrant cohort, one teacher commented:

Half of my class are migrants, including me, so when we had to sit for our citizenship test, Australian citizenship test, there was absolutely nothing about Indigenous history; absolutely nothing. We had a good discussion in the class that that must be included ...

The consequence of these altered approaches appears to be stronger student engagement:

I was teaching a lesson about 'terra nullius' and that really hit home for a lot of the kids of, you know, the Europeans at the time and the way they came in here and, how would you feel if someone came and actually started camping in your backyard and setup, how would you be feeling? I think maybe it opened up more ways to talk about things. The kids are certainly very... very engaged.

While the above quote certainly indicates teacher and student engagement with the history element of the Curriculum, the focus is on a somewhat disembodied recount of the past that does not directly connect with the present.

Discussion

Returning to the research question: "What are the outcomes (for teachers, students and schools) of a professional learning program designed to support teachers?" we want to explore the extent to which the professional learning was transformative. Did it lead to anti-racist praxis? Was there a recognition among teachers that showed their understanding of being complicit in the enterprise of colonialism? Or were the outcomes limited to a more emotional/empathic response, leading to the "white hope" that Maudlin (2014) expresses?

White hopefulness

There is little doubt that the data we collected reflects a strong affective response to the professional learning workshops. It should also be noted that there were five months between the workshops and the interviews we conducted. So, it is reasonable to suggest that the empathic and reflexive responses were sustained in the minds of teachers who participated—in as much as the emotional response was still strong in the participants' memories. But as noted in the literature for changes to be considered antiracist, there must be a movement towards change in actions, such as a commitment "to social action for the purpose of dismantling the dominance paradigm" and actively seeking "cross-cultural and cross-racial interactions"

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I was very emotional and I went ... home and I shared the whole story with my daughters and we all got very emotional about it and that actually helped me
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(Howard, 2016, p. 114). There is evidence in the data of some reflexivity, consistent with a critical examination of self as viewed through at least some of the 5 key ideas presented by Australians Together. However the data exudes a sense of hopefulness, which gives rise to a sense that the ‘white teachers’ we interviewed now had an idea of what they could practically do, it is as if they had found the answer that Maudlin (2014) was looking for in her self-reflexive article we cited earlier.

The data shows that following the workshop, teachers were prepared to adjust their classroom practice. There were examples of teachers accessing and using resources that they previously had not—for example the Map of Indigenous Australia (Horton, 1996). Others moved beyond facts to a more historical and reflective approach to their classroom teaching. Teachers were more inclined to engage with teaching Indigenous perspectives from the Curriculum. Some teachers were more open to discussing difficult issues of colonial history with their students. To the extent that the empathic response led to reduced angst and changed attitudes among teachers, the application of Intergroup Contact Theory seemed to work to reduce prejudice, negative attitudes and tensions consistent with Christ and Kauff (2019). But did teachers recognise their ‘complicity in upholding the... oppressive structures’ (Ohito, 2020, p. 30) they were teaching about?

What’s missing?

If we were to consider this as a workshop designed to encourage antiracist pedagogies in the context of Christian education, there are some missing elements that could be incorporated in future development of a bigger package designed to have a greater transformative impact. Specifically, there are no references to the forming of accountable relationships between teachers and First Nations families and students reported by teachers in the data. Utt and Tochluk (2020) have noted how difficult this can be, especially when there are no First Nations staff at the schools and very few First Nations parents and students to engage with. The schools, which both had close ties to historical missionary endeavours, could have drawn on their network of First Nations schools (for example the system operates a boarding school for First Nations students from remote Australia) for information. But none of these relational actions were followed up by teachers. From a Christian and biblical perspective, if a goal of the PL was about reconciliation or as noted earlier the mandate to “love your neighbour” (Matt 22:39) the impact has been limited. Teachers had not taken the next step outside of the classroom

to build relationships with their local Aboriginal communities. Teachers did not make a connection between their theological position and their teaching or the curriculum, so discussions about antiracism as a Christian mandate (Gal 3:27; 2 Cor 5:18) were strikingly absent in the interview data.

Beyond this, there is little indication that the transformative orientation of teachers has extended to a deeper questioning of themselves in relation to the ‘Nice White’ structures they work within (Castagno, 2014; Wong, 2019; Wozolek and Atif, 2022). No questions or comments were made by teachers about the role of the Church to which the schools belonged (past or present) in the perpetuation of racist or discriminatory practices—perhaps reflecting the discomfort and shame associated with these topics (Ohito, 2020). Further, there was no evidence of questioning or critical review of the curriculum—which they were using in their classroom planning—and its perpetuation of injustices, racism and inequities—or the trivialisation of Indigenous knowledges in the Curriculum that Parkinson and Jones (2018) discuss. While the 5 Key ideas certainly do not ‘whitewash’ the historical facts of colonialism, how these ideas are connected to curriculum or schools’ theological positioning is not clear. While investigators see several references to engagement with the Curriculum in the data, little critique of the Curriculum as a racialised document that promulgates an ‘othering’ discourse that is to a large extent assimilative and silences the traumas, massacres and injustices of the past, is evident.

To be fair, the PL was a two-day trial, and taking teachers to this level of self-critical awareness is a big ask. But the absence of these important transformative discourses highlights the work that remains to be done.

Conclusions

In this article we have reported on the findings of research into the outcomes of professional learning workshops designed to support teachers to better teach the content of the Australian Curriculum’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority. The rationale for this professional learning workshop was the perceived lack of confidence non-Indigenous teachers have in their ability to teach about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. When we interviewed teachers five months after the workshop was held, it was evident that the affective response to the content of the workshop had been sustained. That affective response did translate into improved confidence and greater reflexivity, and it also resulted in changed classroom practices. However, while the approach

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did demonstrate the application of Intergroup Contact Theory to achieve an empathic response to issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to reduce prejudice, attitudes and tensions, it did not result in an embodied or relational response consistent with antiracist praxis. Nor did it result in a deeper questioning of teachers' selves in relation to their complicity in racist or oppressive structures they and their schools were embedded in. Finally, there is potential for further impact in the area of relationships development between the teacher/s, school/s and First Nations Peoples. A change here would be a strong indication that teachers were 'becoming' (in the ontological sense) transformative. **TEACH**

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Author information

Dr Majon Williamson-Kefu is a researcher of mixed heritage, who expresses her own positionality as a 'dynamic in-between' (Williamson-Kefu, 2019). Her doctoral research focused on enhancing the role of learning and teaching around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and perspectives in primary school classrooms throughout Australia.

Assoc. Prof. John Guenther is as a non-Indigenous researcher at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Guenther does not intend to represent the views or standpoints of First Nations Peoples. Rather, his intention in writing is to critically examine publicly available data and use research in ways that challenge conventional wisdom about the role that education plays in society.

Dr Robyn Ober is a Mamu/Djirribal woman, researcher and educator from the rainforest region of North Queensland. She recently completed her PhD thesis titled 'Aboriginal English as a Social and Cultural Identity Marker in an Indigenous Tertiary Educational Context'. Ober has a strong interest in philosophy and practice of both ways education, educational leadership and Indigenous Australian languages in particular, Aboriginal English.

Dr Sam Osborne is a non-Indigenous 'outsider' researcher with significant experience living and working in Aboriginal communities. He coordinates the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Language and Culture programs at the University of South Australia and his research works to privilege Aboriginal voices, languages and knowledges in education dialogue and research.

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