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Decolonising Indigenous education: the case for cultural mentoring in supporting Indigenous knowledge reproduction

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ABSTRACT

Little research exists about Indigenous-led teacher professional learning to improve skills in developing culturally responsive practices in schooling. This paper addresses a noticeable gap in the literature, that of Indigenous people mentoring non-Indigenous teachers to develop culturally responsive pedagogies. In the Australian context, the Decolonising Race Theory framework analyses the impact of an Aboriginal cultural mentoring programme for teachers, shifting the narrative away from racialised discourses about Aboriginal peoples to acknowledging Aboriginal educators as sovereign peoples. Key findings reveal that teachers' growing understanding of the ongoing impact of colonisation on Aboriginal families resulted in increased confidence in building relationships with Aboriginal communities, Country and students and implementing culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies. The DRT analysis also raises serious questions about systemic challenges to be addressed if Aboriginal student outcomes are to improve.

KEYWORDS

Aboriginal education, Indigenous, cultural mentoring, Decolonising Race Theory, teacher professional learning, culturally responsive schooling

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Introduction

In Australia, every child before the age of six will be enrolled in a school. From this point onwards, parents/carers have a legal responsibility to ensure their children attend school every day until they are 17 years old. As such, schools play an extremely influential role in the lives of young people. While education is compulsory, it is also seen as a human right, supported by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2008). There is, therefore, a distinct belief in schooling as benevolent, providing the necessary academic and social grounding to produce confident, capable adults. But what if this was untrue for some? What if schools were actually sites of harm, trauma and were potentially causing damage to students' self-belief?

For decades, Aboriginal[1] people have lobbied for input into the current imposed education system in Australia (Lowe, 2017). With several policies requiring teachers to embed Indigenous perspectives and strategies into schools, it is an opportune moment for Aboriginal people to have substantial input into educational decisions (Bishop, Vass, & Thompson, 2019). While this should represent a shift in the way Indigenous knowledges are recognised and valued, typically Aboriginal knowledges are often considered peripheral or irrelevant in the school curriculum and so are often not adequately represented (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Coupled with the frustration many Indigenous people feel towards the assimilatory effects of the education system (Vass, 2015), this has prompted increased insistence that Aboriginal people should have input into educational decisions for the benefit of Aboriginal students, and indeed all students.

This paper discusses an Aboriginal cultural mentoring programme that followed a three-day cultural immersion experience – Connecting to Country (CTC) – conducted by the Inner City Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). This Aboriginal-led project has achieved notable success across New South Wales (NSW) (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016). It is significant in the challenge it presents to dominant social norms and Western knowledge systems. First, we

contextualise the cultural mentoring project within the broader field of Culturally Responsive Schooling (CRS) before outlining Moodie's (2018) 'Decolonising Race Theory' (DRT) as the theoretical framework applied for analysis. This critical theoretical approach reveals both visible and invisible effects of normative discourses about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, and their interaction with schooling systems. Arguably, despite the best intentions of teachers, these social norms permeate school culture and alienate Aboriginal students.

By applying Moodie's (2018) DRT framework, we analyse Aboriginal cultural mentor and teacher mentee interviews to unpack perceptions of the Aboriginal assertion of sovereignty and futurity as a way in which to understand what decolonising education might mean in this context. We then discuss implications arising from this analysis that reveal significant structural changes needed for a more equitable education system that acknowledges the sovereignty of Indigenous people in Australia.

Situating cultural mentoring within culturally responsive schooling (CRS)

Globally, culturally responsive schooling (CRS) identifies a framework to disrupt western hegemonic power and re-centre power-sharing between student and teacher (Paris & Alim, 2017). Gay (2002) asserts that culturally responsive pedagogy uses the 'cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively' (p. 106), so that students are seen as knowledge holders, rather than passive recipients. Paris and Alim's (2014) 'culturally sustaining' pedagogy, where linguistic and cultural pluralism is at the heart of 'positive social transformation' (p. 1) extends the culturally responsive framework. Meanwhile, Hobson, Lowe, Poetsch, and Walsh (2010) argue for the genuine inclusion of Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge as an enactment of tribal sovereignty to challenge the assimilationist impact of education.

However, teachers are often unaware as to how they can meaningfully incorporate a culturally sustaining approach into their everyday teaching practices (Burgess & Evans, 2017). While education policy in Australia has focused on quality teaching to improve educational outcomes, the persistence of poor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes continues (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014; Gillan, Mellor, & Krakouer, 2017) despite numerous strategies and initiatives to alleviate these. Literacy and numeracy strategies are often perceived to be the panacea for improving Aboriginal educational outcomes but given that these have not 'closed the gap', high-quality teaching for Aboriginal students' needs to move beyond these approaches (Burgess & Lowe, 2019). For example, CRS shows the importance of teachers building relationships to support (Aboriginal) students' cultural identities; understanding (Aboriginal) students' socio-cultural and historical contexts; and utilising quality teaching in a culture of high expectations (Burgess & Evans, 2017; Buxton, 2017). Using these understandings and practices is more powerful when the site of learning is 'on Country'.[2]

Teacher professional learning delivered by Aboriginal cultural educators on Country has increasingly been recognised as a powerful and empowering approach for teachers and community members alike (Harrison, Page, & Tobin, 2016; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009). In particular, teachers report increased confidence in building relationships with Aboriginal students and families; engaging with the local Aboriginal community; and more effectively embedding Aboriginal perspectives into their curriculum and pedagogy (Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016). Following their involvement in the CTC programme, teachers reported frustration upon returning to school as they have little time to fully reflect on and enact their learnings in any meaningful way. Consequently, an Aboriginal-led cultural mentoring pilot project was implemented to assess whether to follow up support delivered by Aboriginal cultural mentors in addressing these issues.

This Aboriginal cultural mentoring project took place in two urban schools in inner-city Sydney over eight weeks (two hours per week). This approach supported teachers' learning by reinforcing the importance of providing opportunities for their students to engage with Aboriginal cultural knowledge and to acknowledge Aboriginal cultural mentors as educators and role models in their communities and schools. Local Aboriginal Education Workers (variations of this title exist across jurisdictions) have been employed in some schools since the 1950s to support teachers in implementing culturally appropriate content (MacGill, 2017) but their work is often not recognised and/or is invisible. Decolonising Race Theory (Moodie, 2018) makes visible these knowledge and skills as embedded in sovereign owners of place highlighting context-specific, localised and diverse understandings of Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories, rather than simply as the

racialised 'other', thus challenging the veracity of 'approved' knowledge from education department 'experts' (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013).

Using Decolonising Race Theory in educational research

Decolonising Race Theory (DRT) is a theoretical framework that is pertinent to the specific legal and socio-historical circumstances in the Australian settler-colonial context and is distinct from other critical theories (such as Critical Race Theory) in centring Indigenous futurities, place and relationality in place (Moodie, 2018). While decolonisation is a problematic term (Tuck & Yang, 2012), it is important to build on key theoretical work (c/f, Freire, 2000; Said, 1978; Smith, 2012) to re-think these debates in terms of material effects, return of sovereign lands back to First Nations peoples and decolonising epistemes in and through the curriculum and research.

In this context, Critical Race Theory (CRT) seeks to challenge dominant ideologies that contribute to racial discrimination and the (re)production of inequality (Solorzano, 1997) and critics argue that without modification, CRT is ineffective when applied to Indigenous contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) as it tends to 'other' through racial theorising (Moodie, 2018, p. 36). This understates the role of culture, inherent connection and obligation to Country and positioning as 'colonised' which are prioritised by Indigenous Australian scholars. In an attempt to refine CRT to address the experiences of Native Americans, Brayboy (2005) provides nine tenets in his development of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). His emphasis on colonisation draws attention to the ongoing imperial project of assimilating/ eliminating Indigenous Peoples through government and educational policies. While there may be similarities in the treatment of US Indigenous Peoples and other settler-states, caution is advised when importing frameworks from one context to another in terms of the significance of place, presence or absence of treaty(s) and specificity of experience to Indigenous peoples.

The need for an Australian oriented CRT was identified by Vass in 2015 and developed by Moodie in 2018. In drawing on the work of Grande (2000), Moodie (2018) contends that CRT doesn't centre issues of sovereignty and self-determination and is consequently limited in 'recognising the ontological diversity and the place-based and sovereign claims of Indigenous peoples' (p. 36). In response, DRT focuses on First Peoples as sovereign beings, rather than racialised beings. While noting that Aboriginal people like other groups are often identified as occupying a racialised positioning, Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2014) note that this reflects a history of representation that often focuses on racial stereotypes and cultural essentialism. As Moodie (2018) notes, 'the methodological and theoretical contribution of Decolonising Race Theory allows centring of Indigenous difference and the disruption of knowledge–power dialectic which perpetuates deficit discourses' (p. 43) highlighting the structures of oppression rather than individual positioning within these. Importantly, DRT places primacy on Indigenous sovereignty, futurity and notions of place, drawing together and building upon the work of Indigenous warrior scholarship (c/f, Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Nakata, 2007).

DRT consists of seven tenets (Moodie, 2018, pp. 38–42) which are outlined as follows:

Logic of elimination

Drawing on Wolfe (2006), Moodie (2018) asserts the '*logic of elimination* serves to describe the processes of erasure that colonial education systems have served' (p. 39). Attempts to eliminate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples included physical acts of genocide as well as political and legal acts of colonisation such as assimilation. Unfortunately, this legacy continues in the form of government and educational policies, and so Aboriginal people remain perceived to be a problem to be 'fixed'. The assimilationist intent of schooling continues the logic of elimination in that this suggests that if Indigenous people conform to Western values, they will provide minimal resistance to land theft and exploitation.

Indigeneity as a political tool for justice

Transnational solidarity is growing amongst Indigenous groups in response to the race discourses which define and categorise Indigeneity as subordinate. This reinforces whiteness and has resulted in increased resistance towards attempts to limit constructions of Aboriginality. This global activism is reconstructing the 'raced' category of Indigeneity as a political

tool for justice; seeking and celebrating 'differences and commonalities across Indigenous communities' (Moodie, 2018, p. 39).

Sovereignty and Indigenous futurity

This tenet recognises Indigenous peoples' autonomous right to develop their/our own policies regarding self-determination, identification, land use and sovereign relations. Intimately linked to the recognition of land ownership and occupation, Indigenous futurity thus 'requires a rejection of settler epistemologies and a recognition of the possibilities of land-based pedagogies for reconnection, disruption and invention' (Moodie, 2018, p. 40).

Cultural interface

Drawing on Nakata's (2007) work, the cultural interface tenet requires Indigenous futurity to function with recognition of the complexities of Indigenous identities, rather than seeing to define Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Thus, the cultural interface 'describes the position from which we interrogate the complexities of power and resist imposed positioning' (Moodie, 2018, p. 40). Here, Indigenous standpoints provide a position from which to analyse knowledge production and challenge representation.

Relationality and collectivism

Martin (2003) and Rowse's (2009) work highlights the diversity of Indigenous peoples, knowledges and life worlds. Indigenous people sustain complex relationships between people and Country (Martin, 2003), with emphasis placed on community obligations (Rowse, 2009). This work does not seek to 'deny hybridity or reify racial categories' (Moodie, 2018, p. 41), but rather enacts a refusal to engage in binary logics or contradictory discourses. Understanding relationality foregrounds collectivism over individualism and acknowledges the fluidity and adaptive nature of cultural identity and expression.

Indigenous methodologies

Storytelling as methodology, and story-as-theory, serves an important purpose in disrupting and rejecting positivism. The emerging diversity of Indigenous methodologies offers complex ways to justify and share Indigenous knowledges that reach beyond storytelling. Smith (2012) presents a number of methodologically diverse projects which 'centre Indigenous people's aims of self-determination and healing' (Moodie, 2018, p. 41).

Reparative activism

Much Indigenous research is inherently political, emboldened by an imperative to disrupt colonial powers and support Indigenous self-determination. It is therefore generative and reparative in its intent and, unlike Western research epistemologies, values process over the outcome; developing from 'critique to include a theory of change' (Moodie, 2018, p. 42). Consequently, ongoing support is necessary for Indigenous scholars to navigate the demands of the academy and assert/justify Indigenous knowledges.

This critical theoretical framework centres Indigenous diversity interrupts deficit discourses and works to detach whiteness from the centre. Furthermore, the seven tenets of DRT can be used to theorise projects in a way which 'moves beyond critique to consider the implications of the spiritual, political, economic, and academic projects of Indigenous peoples' (Moodie, 2018, p. 42). By moving from a focus on race to the role of sovereignty, political activism and Indigenous futurity, a DRT analysis reveals multiple, multifaceted and, at times, divergent Indigenous experiences to articulate deeper and nuanced socio-cultural, historical and political perspectives in a local context that challenge settler-narratives of place.

Methodology

Central to Indigenous methodologies is privileging Indigenous voices (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Martin, 2003; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2012) to provide opportunities for deep engagement with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. Also central to DRT, this methodological approach employs yarning and storytelling (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Laycock, Walker, Harrison, & Brands, 2011; Walker, Fredericks, Mills, & Anderson, 2014) as a focus for data collection as it 'centres place and relationality of place as core concepts in Indigenous education research' (Moodie, 2018, p. 38).

Individual yarns through Aboriginal mentor interviews ($N = 4$) and teacher mentee interviews ($N = 4$), encouraged open, honest and self-reflective responses. A collaborative yarn with six teacher mentees revealed diverse and unique understandings and perceptions of the AECG CTC programme and the cultural mentoring project through experiencing local Aboriginal peoples' deep relationship to place. Moodie's DRT provides an emancipatory theoretical lens because it is refocused from 'race' to Aboriginal concerns for sovereignty, self-determination and pursuing a social justice agenda, which were reflected in many mentee's experiences in the project.

The study was conducted in a well-known, socially and politically active community where the urban setting shapes the nature of learning in Country. Early career and/or newly appointed teachers were selected for the CTC and cultural mentoring project, and the mentoring relationship and process developed organically and collaboratively between mentors and mentees. The emerging, dialogical nature of these relationships resulted in inclusive approaches where the mentees, mentors and their students all played an active role in re-storying place in their learning.

Findings

Analysing the cultural mentoring project through Moodie's (2018) DRT revealed that teacher mentees focused on the role and context of Indigenous rights as they experienced the strong sense of culture, identity, ownership and political activism demonstrated by the Aboriginal cultural mentors. Further supporting this was the relational rather than managerial focus of teacher-mentor interaction, driven by the common purpose of better engaging Aboriginal students and their families in the education process as well as recognising the significant systemic challenges to be addressed when working towards decolonising education.

Moodie's logic of elimination is often reflected in Aboriginal community frustrations about the lack of accurate, reliable and in-depth curriculum content from an Aboriginal perspective, as one mentor notes:

> It's a problem for the education system … it says we should have cultural perspectives and content and inclusion, but if that's the case why don't we have designated courses, not just for Aboriginal kids but for non-Aboriginal kids.

This attempted suppression of Aboriginal knowledges is addressed in this mentoring project as it acknowledges Aboriginal people's expertise and right to articulate their knowledges as they see fit by positioning them as cultural mentors of teachers. This is expressed through personal narratives such as the following mentor's explanation to the teacher and class about identity:

> It's growing up your family, your identity, your song line, your storyline, who you come from, where you come from, what connection to the land do you have? What is spirituality about?

Opportunities to articulate diverse, fluid and collective identities are crucial to asserting sovereignty and participating in reparative activism in order to advocate for Indigenous futurity. Mentees developed a more in-depth understanding about Aboriginal peoples, cultures and histories and pushed back against essentialised pan-Aboriginality stereotypes that limit and dehumanise.

'Indigeneity as a political tool for justice' (Moodie, 2018) has a transnational and local focus, and this project highlights the considerable impact of the local level approach in breaking down misconceptions, misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Indigeneity. This mentor highlights the importance of understanding diversity through local orientations:

> My learning is completely different to somebody else's learning and that depends on what you want and how you want it to be delivered to them. So, there's all these different pedagogies and how to do them, but mine is based around what I know and what

I've learnt on culture.

As mentors draw on their Indigeneity to educate, empower and articulate their collective rights; discussions, understandings and relationships move beyond categories of 'race' to focus on culture and community. One mentor suggests that this collaborative approach to mentoring builds relationships with the 'other':

> It's an honour to be asked to mentor because it assumes you have some knowledges and experiences and I think mentoring's a two-way process … in terms of learning about their skills, their backgrounds and their knowledges.

Here, political empowerment through reciprocity speaks back to the hierarchies that dominate Western education.

The lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty in broader society as well as its absence from the current Australian curriculum (Harrison et al., 2019; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013) is of crucial concern to Aboriginal people. Cultural mentoring provided Aboriginal people with the opportunity to assert their unique relationship to land, reinforcing their sense of sovereignty and disrupting colonial notions of Aboriginal peoples and cultures, as these teachers note:

> There's culture right here in the city … mainstream society doesn't realise, but it's really important to these kids, even if they don't come from here, the fact that they live here makes it really important' … I'm not from this area and for me to find out how much Aboriginal culture is here was eye-opening 'cause I thought it was all in rural areas.

Teacher understanding of the continual presence of a living, adaptive Aboriginal culture is central to recognising and supporting self-determination and Indigenous futurity. This includes providing positive experiences that reaffirm Aboriginal student identity, as one teacher notes:

> Then we took some of his [cultural mentor] ideas and started down here in the garden and created a NSW map of the Aboriginal language groups where the students could show where they came from.

As teachers develop deeper knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal cultures and mobilise this in the classroom, connections are made between the significance of sovereignty, self-determination and autonomy, and Aboriginal student engagement, well-being and achievement at school. The DRT framework is an effective analytical tool here as it makes visible teacher mentee understandings of sovereignty and the critical role this plays in teaching and learning.

Moodie (2018) suggests that Nakata's (2007) cultural interface theory provides a position from which to analyse knowledge production, the complexities of power and resist imposed positioning. In the cultural mentoring programme, expertise was repositioned from Western to Indigenous traditions, thus challenging power relationships within Eurocentric educational structures. The importance of positioning Aboriginal cultural mentors as 'knowers' is noted by one of the teachers in the programme when she says:

> So they're (the students) witnessing that relationship and developing theirs with her (the mentor) … witnessing an Aboriginal person as an expert … 'cause it's too often the other way around.

This contributes to creating new and/or revised ways of thinking such as challenging and counteracting Western knowledge as one mentor explains:

> I've developed something I call 'Learning Waterways' to make it more meaningful and contextual for them out there, broken it down into seven topics but those topics are connected to the syllabus. It's just a subtle way of doing it.

This counter-hegemonic approach challenges Western epistemological and ontological understandings of curriculum and pedagogy.

Through Nakata's (2007) locale (or positioning) of the learner, their agency (or perceived lack of) and the tension that can exist between Western and non-western knowledges, a deeper understanding of the interaction between cultural groups emerges. The following comment by a teacher highlights this:

> I went to a high school where they prided themselves on being Aboriginal … but it manifested more as the Aboriginal kids getting to use the phone in the office when no-one else was allowed to … there was quite a bit of resentment about kids getting special treatment … (but) now I see why and I can see the fairness of it.

Here, the teacher notes how her locale as a student with little understanding of her Aboriginal peers, undermined her agency and created tension between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The cultural mentoring experience opened up space for this teacher to deconstruct her experiences to build new levels of understanding in her own teaching.

One of the critical learnings noted by teachers is evident in Moodie's (2018) relationality and collectivism tenet through an emerging understanding of the centrality of relationships between Aboriginal peoples, knowledges and Country. Listening to the Aboriginal cultural mentors and students discuss these relationships highlights how limited Western education is in supporting Aboriginal student cultural learning:

> This is how we know our songlines … There was a young girl, and when they told me her family, who they were, the family connection in the name, she said my father's Aboriginal, but I've never met him. So, she's asked her mother where her dad was from, and then I connected the two families and linked the Wiradjuri Nation to where she is now. Then I said to her this is where your family has come from, down through those storylines and what people have told us where families were connected from, so you have a land and a family.

The dialogic nature of the mentoring experiences supported this understanding of relationality as connections between mentors, teachers and the broader Aboriginal community developed through listening, yarning and collective experiences. As one mentor explains: 'That's the connectedness to it so that it makes it real, relevant and reconnects it all up so that there is still some sort of balance to it all.' Another mentor highlights the importance of reciprocity when building relationships:

> More than being the authority figure towards them, if you're building the relationship up to try and get there with them, then you know you've got some rapport and you're building that ground with them.

This sense of power-sharing through respectful relationships was evident in the collaborative projects developed by mentors, mentees and their students that were enacted in the classroom.

The notion of reparative activism as an opportunity to decolonise through disrupting Western power is noted by an Aboriginal cultural mentor:

> You're constantly up against ignorance and disrespect for Aboriginal people, culture … we need to start looking at these kind of programs … this is how excited I am about what you are actually doing.

The development and mobilisation of genuine relationships between schools and communities supporting cultural safety, agency and co-construction of knowledge, mobilises political action that decentres Western knowledges as superior. This was noted by a mentor: 'I think the fact that we had a project to do together that kind of made it … I had a vision as to see where it could actually go, and I think that was important for both of us.' Moreover, this project affirms and empowers Aboriginal student identity as family and community knowledges and skills are privileged and centred in curriculum and pedagogy. One teacher connects this with the importance of activism through community voice:

> It was new and inspiring experience that demonstrated the value of the Aboriginal – land relationship and local Aboriginal peoples' commitment to and persistence in fighting for their rights … to see that people are working so hard and going to such lengths to have a voice and bring the community out into broader Australia … was powerful for me.

Employing DRT as an analytical tool reveals how the CTC and cultural mentoring project deepens teacher understanding of the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal communities, families and therefore on the Aboriginal students they teach. For many teachers, it made the invisible, visible and forged a path for deeper understanding, respect and collaborative action.

Discussion

Analysis through Moodie's (2018) DRT framework disrupts colonial hegemonic (re)production of knowledge by focusing Aboriginal cultural mentors' and teacher mentees' attention on concepts central to the framework such sovereignty, Indigenous futurity, self-determination, reparative activism and Country-centred relationality. The cultural mentoring project created space for Aboriginal voices, knowledges and perspectives and embedding Indigenous knowledges, stories and skills in the classroom, offering teachers and students the opportunity to engage with multiple and complex knowledge systems. For teachers, this highlighted the invisibility of Western knowledge systems that often obliterate Indigenous epistemologies and reinforce white privilege and the deleterious effects of colonial knowledge and structures (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014). Moreover, the project opened up ways in which these effects could be counteracted by centring Indigenous knowledges and building on notions of relationality and collectivism through engaging with Aboriginal community educators as cultural mentors. This builds teacher capacity to develop the knowledge and skills required to disrupt Western knowledge hierarchies and challenge notions of whiteness as authority/expert. Indigenous knowledges became recognised as foundational for building classroom curriculum and Indigenous methodologies as a key to culturally responsive teaching.

Throughout the project, non-Aboriginal teachers became increasingly aware of the ignorance and disrespect often directed towards Indigenous peoples, including the misconception that Aboriginal culture only exists in rural and remote areas, which in turn, strengthened their commitment to improve their own teaching. Challenging and addressing deficit discourses became part of the commitment to improving educational discourses about Aboriginal students and their families, providing an excellent example of the reconciling impact of creating new knowledge at the interface between Aboriginal and colonial knowledge systems (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

Teachers came to appreciate the diversity of Aboriginal knowledges and skills, in particular narrative and dialogic approaches such as storytelling, observing and collaborative action that reinforced the relationality, connectivity and holistic nature of teaching/learning in this area. An understanding of the interconnectedness of people, place and knowledge developed as teachers grew to appreciate the importance of building and sustaining relationships with community, Country and students. Cultural mentoring presents a pathway for schools and teachers to genuinely engage with local Indigenous knowledges and demonstrates the benefits to all. Through the DRT lens, this project challenges the colonial legacies that persist in Australia's education system and reveals a pathway for non-Indigenous people to envisage working in and contributing to this space.

It is essential to note the limitations of the project, such as the short timeframe and a small number of participants, limits the breadth rather than the depth of findings. This affected the potential impact of the project, noted by the teachers who reported wanting more ongoing support to habitually embed the new knowledge and skills into their everyday practice. Significantly this approach shouldn't be just about attitudinal shifts, but deeper behavioural and cognitive change and a whole system commitment to cultural change in schools and the institutions that support them.

Implications

The implications reveal key systemic challenges if any shift in Indigenous students' educational, cultural and social outcomes is to occur. These are perhaps best articulated through the questions raised in the DRT analysis as follows:

- How can local Indigenous knowledges and contexts be prioritised and privileged in increasingly centralised, generalised and universalised educational structures?
- How can valuable professional learning outcomes that acknowledge the critical role of sovereignty and self-determination in improving Aboriginal student outcomes, be accounted for within current management architectures?
- When will space and commitment for listening to, valuing and learning from Aboriginal voices which foreground relationality and collectivism be made, to move beyond decision making and empowerment to agenda-setting and ownership?
- How can Aboriginal communities and their schools and teachers push back against the institutional racism and exclusion that thrives and/or re-invents itself when challenged?

- What does 'success' look like for Aboriginal students beyond the material value of employment, and how can this be operationalised in a highly prescribed, centralised and monitored system?
- How can social justice outcomes, as featured in the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) be genuinely achieved for Aboriginal students if there is no recognition of First Nation sovereignty and status?
- What does culturally responsive schooling look like in the Australian context, or is there a more appropriate, local articulation that addresses the questions posed here?

Conclusion

Evident in this project is the value of local Aboriginal-led cultural education for teachers that centres Country as teacher and curriculum and involves students in the teaching and learning process (Harrison et al., 2016). Opportunities for two-way learning based on trusting and respectful relationships foreshadowed reciprocal and collaborative communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) aimed at improving the educational, social and cultural outcomes for Aboriginal students. Founded on a strength-based approach, this project invokes culturally responsive schooling principles by acknowledging Aboriginal cultural educators as experts and mobilising community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), thus challenging deficit discourses and 'outing' the deleterious effects of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples. Analysis of mentors' and mentees' experiences and perceptions of the cultural mentoring project, using the DRT framework, provided new opportunities to look beyond critical race theory to consider a deeper understanding and appreciation of the central role of sovereignty, reparative activism and Indigenous futurity (, 2018). This emerged quite clearly here, where Aboriginal people were teaching the teachers and connections to Country, place and land rights were central to the narrative. Acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as sovereign custodians of Country, the DRT framework reveals decolonising possibilities that may well emerge through grass-roots movements if opportunities to challenge systemic prejudices and exclusions are mobilised.

At this point, placing Indigenous voices front, centre and as the foundation of teaching and learning creates a context for decolonisation to occur, if those voices are recognised, remunerated and respected. While the matter of recognition is occurring; albeit recent and slow; the matter of remuneration is not occurring as fully as required and the issue of respect still remains problematic. Therefore, a significant commitment to embedding human and financial resources into institutional structures is necessary but not likely in the current climate of government budget cuts and obsession with external standardised measurements of success as the only story in education worth telling and funding. The potential of localised projects is in creating a groundswell movement that infiltrates the systems and shifts perspectives irrevocably; ensuring future generations of Aboriginal students are not forced to endure schools as sites of harm and trauma, but rather experience equitable educational, social and cultural outcomes as sovereign people of this Country we now call Australia.

Notes

1. We acknowledge the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' are colonial constructs and use these interchangeably throughout the paper.
2. Country – capital 'C' denotes a specific understanding of and respect for the significance of homelands to Aboriginal people.

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