

CNS Pedagogical Elements

An Introduction

Why a Culturally Nourishing Schooling Pedagogy?

The following lays out the core elements of the CNS pedagogy. The five elements have been derived from the foundational CNS paper by Lowe, Skrebneva, Burgess, Harrison & Vass (2020) that first laid out what the authors argued, were the constituent elements of their Australian Culturally Nourishing Schooling project. The principles of this paper were established on the back of the empirical research undertaken by the Aboriginal Voices project team, which had undertaken 10 Systematic Reviews of recent Australian research on Aboriginal education. At the project completion in 2020, the team was in a position “to make some claims about 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, outcomes for Indigenous students improve.” (Moodie, Vass, & Lowe, 2021).

Based on the impoverished intergenerational state of educational outcomes for Australian First Nations students and the absence of research that could identify examples of sustained educational improvement, CNS represents a notable opportunity to methodically draw on the evidence of those few programs that identified their potential to impact on the educational engagement and outcomes of students, and to have underpinned successful programs. These findings identified the pre-eminent importance of 5 core issues: genuine community engagement; of teachers being relational, responsive and impactful; the critical place of a student’s Indigenous identities and access to community supported language and cultural programs to their success at school; of deeply engaged, relational leadership that understands the particular environments in which they operate; and the need for a deeper understanding of curriculum and the work it does to marginalise First Nations knowledges and experiences, and a pedagogy that supports teachers to develop relational and engaging practices of teaching.

What follows is an overview of the five constituent elements that make the CNS Pedagogic Framework. Each element is defined by both empirical and theoretical research on culturally responsive / sustaining pedagogies developed in post-colonial jurisdictions including Australia, New Zealand, and North America.

1. Culturally Inclusive Knowledge Making

In a culturally nourishing school, teachers engage students with the language to explicitly identify, understand and actualise cultural knowledge, connections to Country and respect of community. The cultural wealth that students bring to the classroom, their connections to families and community provides children with the skills to build on that cultural wealth and resilience in ways that underpin their agency. For this, local cultural knowledges uniquely position students in schooling, linking to linguistic, historical, and cultural connections to Country. Teaching and learning practices provide opportunities for local Aboriginal knowledges to be explored within the classroom and highlight how their relationships with dominant knowledge and ways of thinking. Teachers support explicit and genuine engagement with knowledge making practices and contestations assists Indigenous learners with their agency, cultural location and resisting assimilatory forces. Success as an Indigenous learner is underpinned by making socio-cultural experiences visible.

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2. Shared decision-making practices

Learners and their families have agency in the actualisation of their aspirations for success through schooling practices and community driven protocols that are driven by achieving equity and self-determination. For this, teachers and schools are to share decision-making with both students and their families. Ensuring student success goes beyond simply accessing cultural programs, but instead recognises the inherent jurisdiction, authority, and regulation that Aboriginal people have regarding the schooling of the children and their access to programs that resonate with their unique identities and connections to culture and knowledges.

3. Indigenous identities and well-being practices

A positive sense of self-esteem, healthy identity formation, agency, productive engagement, and political consciousness are crucial for learners in formal school settings. Moreover, the capacity to engage with the local (and broader) community in activities that support Indigenous autonomy and contribute to sustaining the socio-cultural vibrancy and well-being of the community, is a right of Indigenous peoples. Schooling practices underpin Indigenous students socio-political positioning, assists positive identity-work through genuine cultural and linguistic inclusion in curriculum and more broadly across the school. Greater the access to Indigenous knowledges, heritage, and perspectives, can lead to strengthening engagement with Country, Elders, and local communities. The positive affect on student's sense of identity, especially their ability to challenge problematic representations of Indigenous people, the effects deficit theorising, and the systemic acceptance of student underachievement, the greater the likelihood of achieving academic success and a strong and positive Indigenous identity.

4. Socio-political consciousness raising practices

Teachers, students, and Cultural Mentors explicitly explore the socio-political conditions and arrangements that underpin the web of relationships that flow in and through the school community. This is a purposeful process of interrogating power, decision-making, and positionality as the basis of naming the world, reflecting on it, and dialoguing as the precursor to then actively 'transforming' the socio-political conditions and arrangements that impact on people. Acting on and in the world entails genuine engagement with Indigenous Standpoints, rather than 'polite acknowledgement'. Teaching and learning are interactive, with shared decision making, it can be thought of as a spiral discourse where family like relationships underpin re-storying as a means by which to establish collaborative understanding. Knowledge-making practices engage with the complexities of contestations in ways that interrupt the reproduction of knowledge hierarchies.

5. High expectation relationship making practices

Recognising, respecting, and valuing Indigenous identities as a foundation of establishing and maintaining culturally safe and high academic achieving learning environments. For this to be achieved, socially and academically empowering educators enact high expectations for all students through a commitment to every student's success. This entails building 'learning relationships' that are observable in the every-day interactions of teachers with students. Deficit assumptions of Indigenous peoples, by educators and learners, are identified and countered with anti-racist curriculum and teaching practices.