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A Framework for Social Justice in Education

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Abstract

Political philosopher Nancy Fraser has developed a theory of social justice with three dimensions: Redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political). This article first presents Fraser's theory. Then I describe in her terms the successes and challenges encountered in four primary schools in Australia that were trying to provide educational equity for all students, especially their Indigenous students. That evidence suggests that the dimensions of redistribution and recognition are both essential for "closing the gap" in academic achievement, and that representation is important for school and community relationships.

Keywords: social justice theory, educational equity, Indigenous education, primary school curriculum

Un Marco para la Justicia Social en Educación

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Abstract

La filósofa política Nancy Fraser ha desarrollado una teoría de la justicia social que contempla tres dimensiones: la redistribución (económica), el reconocimiento (cultural) y la representación (política). En este artículo se presenta, en primer lugar, la teoría de Fraser. A continuación se describe en sus términos los éxitos y los retos a los que se enfrentan cuatro escuelas de educación primaria en Australia, las cuales intentan proporcionar equidad educativa para todo el alumnado y especialmente para el alumnado indígena. Las evidencias sugieren que las dimensiones de la redistribución y el reconocimiento son esenciales para "cerrar la brecha" en el rendimiento académico así como que la representación es relevante para las relaciones entre la escuela y la comunidad.

Keywords: teoría de la justicia social, equidad educativa, educación indígena, currículum de educación primaria

At Cannes, “The Sapphires” received a 10-minute standing ovation. The film follows four young singers from a remote Aboriginal mission who entertain troops during the Vietnam War. (“Up Front”, p. 24)

Indigenous Australians were painted in first settlement art [mid-18th C], but then virtually disappeared until [David] Boyd and others brought them back in the 1940s and ‘50s, long before any related political movement. (“Spirit of Australia,” retrospective celebration of David Boyd’s art, pp. 35-40)

Indigenous artists and tourism operators are helping to make Tropical North Queensland a tempting destination for the culturally curious. (“Art of the North”, pp. 49-54).

I was surprised to find these three articles on Aboriginal topics in the August, 2012 issue of QUANTAS, the monthly magazine of the Australian national airline, in the seat pocket on my flight home after one of my periodic months as a visiting researcher at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in the state capital, Brisbane (Australia's third-largest city). I had been working on an evaluation of a federally-funded program to improve the education of Aboriginal students in a sample of schools—some more urban, others more remote—across the continent.¹

I was surprised, that is, because of the Indigenous peoples of four Pacific rim countries—Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States—the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia are arguably the most oppressed and most easily ignored. Comprising 2.4% of the national population, they were only made citizens in 1967 and are the only group of the four who have never had a treaty against which claims for justice can be made. Given these facts, why would QUANTAS editors give them valuable space? Question for readers: does the inclusion of these three cultural items in a commercial publication constitute an expression of “recognition” significant for the Indigenous peoples themselves?

In this article, I will include descriptions of schools with Indigenous students, all but the first from my own observations over the past 20

years, including this recent trip, in order to exemplify a framework for analyzing efforts toward social justice in education that readers may find useful elsewhere. The “Justice” framework is the work of political philosopher Nancy Fraser and has only recently been cited in analyses of educational issues (e.g., [Artiles, 2011](#)). Her latest version of the framework has three dimensions: *redistribution* (economic), *recognition* (cultural, as in those Qantas items), and *representation* (political). More on each below, with suggested meanings in education, and then examples from observations in Australian schools.

Fraser's Dimensions of Justice

Here are [Fraser's \(2003\)](#) opening words on the first two dimensions:

In today's world, claims for social justice seem increasingly to divide into two types. First, and most familiar, are redistributive claims, which seek a more just distribution of resources and wealth. Examples include claims for redistribution from the North to the South, for the rich to the poor, and (not so long ago) from the owners to the workers. To be sure, the recent resurgence of free-market thinking has put proponents of redistribution on the defensive. Nevertheless, egalitarian redistributive claims have supplied the paradigm case for most theorizing about social justice for the past 150 years.

Today, however, we increasingly encounter a second type of social-justice claim in the "politics of recognition." Here the goal, in its most plausible form, is a difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect (p.7).

[Fraser \(2003\)](#) goes on to argue that in today's world, both dimensions remain essential in order to solve problems that arise in either one: "In virtually every case, the harm at issue comprise both maldistribution and misrecognition in forms where neither of those injustices can be redressed entirely indirectly but where each require some practical attention" (p. 25). Fraser's argues from examples of injustices of

gender, race, and class in society at large. How might redistribution and recognition apply more specifically to injustices in education?

The educational meaning of "redistribution" is more obvious. "Resources" that require more equitable distribution certainly include intellectual matters as well as monetary. More specifically, educational recognition means ensuring access—in every school and classroom, not just in the rhetoric of policy and plans—to an intellectually rich curriculum for all students, especially those whose families and communities have been denied that access in the past. It has become all the more important today for the Indigenous people of Australia for two reasons: first, the increasing level of education required in more and more jobs (thus affecting the attainment of any monetary redistribution), and second, the cumulative intergenerational legacy of educational "deficits" that year-by-year additively become educational "debts" with historical, economic, sociopolitical and moral components (Ladson-Billings, 2006, based on US data).

The educational meaning of "recognition" is more complex. Historically, Fraser (2003) describes the rise of what is sometimes called "identity politics," where members of marginalized groups seek to counter dominant and pervasive deficit theories and practices that assume their cultures, knowledges, values, even their humanity, are of no worth. At a 1997 educational conference in Australia, two teachers at Yipirinia, an independent Aboriginal school, named such practices "*terra nullius* education"—a metaphorical extension of the dominant characterization of the land of the continent itself as "no one's land" and thus freely available for appropriation by the (originally British) settlers from 1788. This assumed legitimacy continued until the Australian High Court decided in favor of a Torres Strait Island plaintiff, Eddie Mabo, in an historic land rights case in 1992. *Terra nullius* education metaphorically refers to Aboriginal student minds being considered empty like the land until invaded by teachers and texts. Educational justice, by contrast, would require recognition and inclusion in the school curriculum of their histories, cultures, and knowledges.

The Australian federal government is now in the final stages of developing a national curriculum, reportedly in part to diminish variations in standards among the states (a redistributive intent). In

addition to the usual standards in each curriculum area are three "cross-curricular priorities", of which one is "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures" (Phillips & Lampert, 2012, p.1)—just what recognition requires.

In a separate article, Fraser (2000) suggests an alternative "social status" interpretation of recognition:

What requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction (p 4)... [Claims for recognition are] aimed not at valorizing group identity but rather at overcoming subordination... Redressing misrecognition now means changing social institutions—or, more specifically, changing the interaction-regulating values that impede participation at all relevant institutional sites. (p. 5)

In education, both of Fraser's interpretations of recognition are useful: The *identity* meaning applies to "what" is taught, the curriculum; the *status* meaning applies to "how" it is taught, the quality of instruction, especially through all the moment-to-moment teacher-student interactions (Cazden, 2001).

Fraser (2005) added a third dimension, the political dimension of representation, when the forces of globalization made it clear that *who* was making decisions was becoming increasingly important. When transnational corporations outsource manufacturing jobs, workers' claims for redistribution through union demands lose their force. Trade treaties negotiated through the World Trade Organization can override environmental or labor laws previously passed in any of the nation states. And European readers will be all too familiar with current disputes over the austerity measures forced on national governments by regional or international organizations such as the EU or the International Monetary Fund. In all these cases, the political question of representation on decision-making bodies come to the fore.

Fraser seems to assume that such issues of representation do not arise within nation-states. It's not hard to question this assumption, for example when justice for women is still lacking in many spheres of life virtually everywhere. Moreover, with respect to the status of Indigenous

peoples, they are arguably the least adequately represented within their own countries. That is certainly still true in Australia, despite the Mabo court decision and the official “Sorry” speech of incoming Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd that was unanimously passed as a motion by Parliament in February, 2008. In decision-making in education, the importance of representation extends down to the school level, especially in countries where considerable authority is devolved from federal and state governments to each local public school.

In the final chapter of a new edition of a text for undergraduate students in pre-service teacher education with chapters by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors, [McLaughlin et al. \(2012, p.183\)](#) present a chart of "Six types of school-community participation".

Table 1

Six types of school-community participation

Type 1	Parents support schools from home	Assimilationist
Type 2	School and home communication	Integrationist
Type 3	Schools support parents	Integrationist
Type 4	Parent and community support in schools	Delegationist
Type 5	School and community links	Delegationist
Type 6	Partnership in decision-making	Autonomous

[McLaughlin et al. \(2012\)](#) state clearly that "The most desirable approach to school and community participation in Indigenous education is autonomy":

The main principle underlying the autonomous approach is the capacity to exercise the power of decision-making which requires non-Indigenous groups to surrender their historic power and so remove various pressures of dominance over Indigenous people (Heslop, 1998). Furthermore, there must be a more positive relationship between the stakeholders in education so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people interact as equal partners,

"where the expertise is pooled to achieve objectives that are consistent with the aspirations of community members" (Heslop, 1998). (p. 183)

With its underlying emphasis on parity of representation and participation, Type 6 fits Fraser's theory well.

Reconsider now those cultural items in the QUANTAS magazine. Instead of affecting any of Fraser's dimensions of justice, they seem more designed to benefit Quantas and the associated travel industry by showing what a diversely interesting country Australia is to explore.

Examples from Australian Schools

Four examples of programs in Australian schools show the challenges in reforming schools in order to increase the achievement of poor and marginalized minorities, especially indigenous students. The first report comes from published work of QUT colleagues; the second and third are my observations from the 1990's (Cazden, 2000) supplemented by more recent second-hand information. The fourth is from my 2012 trip. The four schools are located in three of the eight Australian 'states' and 'territories'.

A current project in Queensland

A group of colleagues at QUT (Woods et al., in press) are the first to my knowledge to use Fraser's justice model in designing their intervention in a primary school located in a low-income community within Brisbane's "urban sprawl." The 600 students are challengingly diverse, from 23 different cultural backgrounds:

- 11-15% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander,
- 14% from varied Pacific Islands,
- 6% meet stringent state requirements for English as a Second Language programs (primarily migrants and humanitarian refugees from Russia, Korea, Burma, the Congo and Afghanistan), plus a large proportion of all students require some form of behavioral and learning support.

Under state and federal pressure to increase their scores on annual

national achievement tests, such schools, especially in the US, often are pressured to adopt scripted programs that may get short-term gains but deskill teachers in the longer term.

Woods and colleagues rejected that strategy. Instead, "teachers and researchers worked with the 'four resources model' of literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Muspratt et al., 1997), 'multiliteracies' and digital and media arts pedagogies (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) while building substantial links to community knowledge, locally relevant Indigenous knowledge and traditional school subject knowledge"—a plan explicitly designed to fit the first two dimensions of Fraser's justice model: redistribution and recognition. With respect to her third dimension, representation, it is not clear exactly where decisions about curriculum and pedagogy were made. But reading Woods et al's acknowledgement (in press, fn 1) of their "partners"—the School, the Queensland [state] Teachers Union, and the Indigenous community of and around the school—this reform project seems to have gone further toward inclusive participation than many.

Because of space limitations, I will only briefly recount where success came more easily and where with more resistance. Writing a progress report at the beginning of the fourth and last year of the project, Woods et al report the success of newly-created learning sites: the after-school Media Club and the Indigenous Cultural/Homework Hub "were flourishing"; there is an Indigenous language program for grades 4-7, and a cultural studies program is provided to all students by an Indigenous teacher.

But when these real successes brought no measurable achievement gains, Woods et al diagnosed the problem as too little attention to "substantive intellectual demand":

With the principal's green light, we had a long, difficult, and somewhat prickly discussion in a staff meeting. The issue, we explained, was one...of upping the ante under the expectation that students from diverse cultural and linguistic background, some of whom were still struggling with learning basic skills, were ready and able to discuss 'big ideas'... We made an empirical case that while basic skills were necessary for improved achievement...they were not sufficient. We explained that sustained engagement and improved outcomes for the most at-risk students required

intellectual demand, connectedness to the world, and sustained conversation [citing large-scale research in the US by Newmann et al, 1996 and in Australia by Ladwig, 2007].

Some teachers began to change their curriculum in significant ways, for example working with two other QUT researchers (Mills and Levido, 2011) to bring the digital component of the project into their classroom. One teacher "shifted unit content to 'About Me' web pages"; a grade 5 teacher had her students create videographies of "'healthy places' in our community". At one point, the teacher commented to the researcher, "You should hear the discussions we're having now, the questions they're asking, and their understandings of the world."

As Woods et al. (in press) make clear, Fraser's cognitive dimension is here serving both as an end in itself and as a means to more effective redistributive dimension also. But for other teachers, "who displayed cognitive dispositions in their approach to engaging students, it continued to be more difficult to make these elements central to curriculum content selections" (Woods et al., in press). One Year 1 teacher welcomed "expressions of diverse linguistic and cultural identities" (Woods et al., in press) in the daily morning routines or during breaks and after school, and she was one of the most frequent teacher visitor to the weekly Indigenous Culture/Homework Hub. But "a redistributive focus on explicitly teaching dominant linguistic resources did take precedence over building on the skills and experiences that the young students brought to the classroom" (Woods et al., in press),

Her concern was with the capacity of her students, who spoke culturally and class-inflected variants of English, to produce standard Australian English in high-stakes school literacy tasks... As the term progressed, the focus sharpened on topic-specific vocabulary and the schematic structure of the narrative genre... Results on assessment items demonstrated that most of the students in the class seemingly understood and could use the metalanguage for describing narrative structure. The teacher reflected that she hadn't "*dumbed it down...*"

In short, while pursuing redistributive goals in a high-stakes accountability environment, the teacher's approach had raised an aspect of the intellectual quality of her pedagogy, and was challenging deficit discourses....But the project sought also to encourage more substantive and respectful links to the students' communities and outside class lives, while upping the ante on substantive disciplinary content and on the inclusion of local and global issues of importance (Woods et al., in press).

Yet, all this time, the medium of this otherwise successful literacy work was a preplanned unit on the decontextualized topic of pirates.

In relating this episode, with the teacher's disappointing retention of the unit topic of pirates, these QUT researchers set a very high standard for implementing school reform in accord with Fraser's model. My remaining three examples illustrate other challenges.

Yirrkala in East Arnhem Land (Northern Territory)

During the 1990's, I had the chance to visit Yirrkala Community School in the Northern Territory, the Australian state that has the highest proportion of Indigenous peoples. Yirrkala is a small community of Aboriginal Yolngu people, 18km from a large mining town. My description here combines 15-20 year-old memories with current Wikipedia entries. The community is well-known, partly because of its leadership in earlier land-right struggles, notably the 1963 petition written on a piece of their traditional bark painting presented to the Federal government to protest the announcement that a portion of their land was to be sold to a mining company. While that fight was lost, its publicity helped prepare non-Indigenous Australia for the highest court's MABU decision 30 years later. On my first visit in 1991, the principal of the school was Manduwuy Yunupingu--a member of one of the most prominent land rights families. By the time of my second visit, he had left the school to found the Yothu Yindi rock band that became internationally known, especially for their political anthem, "TREATY".

At least in the '90's, Yirrkala organized its curriculum around a metaphor of the contact zone where the local river meets a gulf of the Pacific Ocean—*estuary* in English, *ganma* or *garma* in Yolngu dialects. Flying west in a small plane from Yirrkala to Darwin after one visit, I could see clearly the swirling colors in the *ganma* waters: bluer from the sea, browner from the river. Metaphorically, *ganma* is where cultures

meet: fresh water is the Indigenous Yolngu knowledge and practices, tidal sea water is the white 'Balanda' knowledge; and one place where they meet is the school. (Manduwuy described his bi-racial Yothu Yindi rock band as a similar *ganma* mix of popular and traditional cultures of music and dance). Much of the school curriculum was taught in Yolngu, and there was at least an experimental attempt to devise a math curriculum based on abstract patterns in the Yolngu kinship system.

In Fraser's terms, I would now say that Yirrkala was strong in recognition but not in redistribution. If the two strands can be kept in balance in the *ganma* space, then the resulting mix nourishes richly diverse forms of life--biological in the literal space, intellectual in the metaphorical. Such intellectual richness is just what Woods et al and their partners worked hard to try to create in that Queensland school, and explains their disappointment when that Grade 1 teacher taught her otherwise valuable redistributive justice literacy unit around the intellectually impoverished topic of pirates.

Traeger Park School (also in the Northern Territory)

Traeger Park primary school existed in Alice Springs until it was closed by the NT Department of Education in 1991. I can speak knowledgeably about only one part of the school's success: what was then called 'Concentrated Language Encounters' (CLE) developed by Brian Gray with Traeger Park teachers in the 1980's. At that time, the students were about 75% Aborigines; later the percentage was close to 100. My account draws on Gray's writings (1985, 1990) and Gray and Cazden (1992), talks with him and two Traeger Park teachers, Sue O'Callaghan and Fiona McLaughlin, and observations in their classrooms in 1991, at the height of the tragically failed campaign to save the school. One indication of the school's success was the remarkable student attendance, a chronic problem reported in other Aboriginal schools. Even in its final term, attendance in the two classrooms I visited was 22 out of 25 and 19 out of 22.

CLE was designed to create activity structures and then discourse structures in which the children could come to understand how language (here meaning the language of mainstream education, English)

is used in the classroom to negotiate school learning. The activity structures were designed as condensed forms of familiar interactional and discourse structures, and often involved role-playing in small groups so participation of each child was ensured, with the teacher as the only 'native speaker' of the contextually-required discourse participating in role.

So, for example, in a curriculum unit on health, the children took trips to the Aboriginal Health Centre, Hospital, and Ambulance Brigade in Alice Springs, and the Visiting Nurse visited the class. 'Transactional' genres such as patient records and receptionist memos were practised in role plays; narratives of accidents or treatments were negotiated by teacher and children after the role plays, emphasizing event sequence; factual reports were similarly negotiated to summarize important learnings. Although the CLE program had only been developed through the 3rd grade, teachers of older students created their own extensions. In 1991 when I visited, Fiona McLaughlin was teaching a unit on the law to her sixth and seventh graders. They had sat in on court sessions; a local Aboriginal woman lawyer had visited the class; and they had role-played examples of legal discourse.

Two CLE features went beyond more typical language experience and role-playing activities. One was the repeated experiences the students have with significant curriculum knowledge through which they develop a foundation for speaking and writing about it with authority. Second was the active role of the teacher, both within the role-playing, and then by scaffolding, modeling, and giving explicit instruction in the oral and written discourse structures in which that knowledge is conventionally expressed.

CLE activities were designed for only one part of the *ganma* metaphor and only one dimension of Fraser's justice model: the redistribution of access to dominant discourse and literacy. I was told about a complementary recognition of Aboriginal presence in the Traeger Park curriculum, but Gray was firm that the goal of his program was only the first—in this respect in contrast to Woods et al.'s more integrated justice goals.

Gray's program is now used in more Australian schools, but with changes. Gray renamed it Accelerated Literacy, in recognition of the

rarely acknowledged fact that in order for any achievement 'gap' to be closed, the under-achieving students have to learn *faster* than the rest² (more on that “In conclusion” below). Gray himself has since retired, and so has his original co-designer, Wendy Cowey, but there is still a website for the National Accelerated Literacy Project.

For a few years Gray and Cowey collaborated with David Rose, a linguist from Michael Halliday’s functional grammar group at the University of Sydney and Rose has now developed a conceptually-related but organizationally separate program he calls Reading to Learn³. One major difference is that the base in concentrated language encounters has been dropped in favor of texts that have more complex language for students to work with (Wendy Cowey, telephone communication, 2012).

Finally, Fraser’s political dimension of representation and parity of participation in decision-making became crucial for both Traeger Park and Yirrkala. In the early '90's the Northern Territory government closed Traeger Park, despite high attendance figures and strenuous community protests. The Aboriginal community of Yirrkala has its own governing structure, the Nambara Schools Council that "represents the people of the Yirrkala area in decision-making about the operations of both the Yirrkala Community Centre and the Yirrkala Homelands Schools" [which includes the community school that I visited and satellites for children whose families have moved to more remote homelands] (Nambara Schools Council, 1999). But it does not control the financial resources that those operations require. The first section of its 1995 submission to the federal Human Rights Commission is about "Affirming rights to Bilingual education programs." The Northern Territory had had a widely acclaimed bilingual education program, encouraging instruction in both Aboriginal languages and English:

We are specifically indicating our concern about the likelihood of the removal of resources integral to providing the necessary support for the Bilingual education Program at Yirrkala and in other communities in the Northern Territory.

It is important to highlight that this submission is in direct response and opposition to the Northern Territory's decision of December 1, 1998, to replace the well-established Bilingual Education programs in Indigenous schools with English as a Second Language (ESL) English-only Program (Nambara Schools Council, 1999, p.2).

These examples indicate the importance of that third representation dimension for the success of redistribution and recognition dimensions as well.

A primary school in South Australia

As mentioned, I visited a school while in Australia this past August. A QUT colleague and I spent four days in a primary school in a country town in South Australia, on the edge of the desert that covers much of the continental interior. Official statistics show the school as 70-80% Aboriginal; the principal told us many times that the students are "virtually all" Aboriginal and that's who they plan for. We saw deliberate efforts by the principal and her committed staff in the direction of all three justice dimensions.

Even before we arrived, the principal had e-mailed that they were developing a "systematic and integrated" literacy curriculum for the whole school, and mentioned again during our visit the children's need for "basic skills.", redistributive justice in education. During our visit we observed a consultant working with all teachers and then some children on one component--spelling. After his visit, we sat in on the staff meeting at which the teachers discussed with exemplary commitment and professionalism how they would carry on what they had learned. The reading and writing components are contracted with another consultant for help with Accelerated Literacy (AL), the outgrowth of Gray's work in Traeger Park. While that program is designed for whole-class teaching, we also saw students grouped by reading ability for "guided reading".

Undoubtedly, many of these students do need work on basic skills. But our snapshot observations at this point in the curriculum's development give cause for concern. Each component is being taught

separately. With the exception of the AL text, no other text longer than a sentence was in use, and no one read a story to even the youngest pre-primary children. The curriculum uses predominantly decontextualized sounds (for phonics), words (for spelling) and unconnected sentences (for grammar). No one mentioned a potential problem of contrasting principles of sequencing among the various component programs. For example, Accelerated Literacy begins with texts of paragraph length followed by sentences, clauses and phrases, words and then sound/letter correspondence last, while the phonics program is designed in the (more typical) opposite direction. The value of "explicit instruction" was frequently mentioned, but one wonders what is being made explicit: only the visible or audible behavioral objectives or also underlying cognitive understandings and applications.

The principal was clear about her goals, but I can only report here what we saw: any "systematic integration" of the literacy curriculum is left for the students themselves to work out, and the "intellectual demand, connectedness to the world, and sustained conversation" recommended by Woods et al. for that first school in Queensland are also missing here.

This South Australian school is making significant efforts to recognize their students' Aboriginal histories and cultures. An Aboriginal language program is scheduled once a week for each grade. It is taught by a credentialed Aboriginal teacher, and classroom teachers attend with their students so they can encourage use of the language at other times. There is an Aboriginal Educational plan for the school that requires all teachers to infuse these perspectives throughout the curriculum and once each year carry out a 4-week "cultural" unit. The principal and vice-principal are aware that less than half of the teachers had carried out such a unit at the time of our visit in the second half of the academic year, despite offers of help and resources from the Aboriginal staff, and they all vow to be firmer about this commitment in 2013.

Some of the responsibility for preparing teachers to take on this commitment rests with pre-service teacher-training programs. In their recent survey of a national sample of Australian teachers' knowledge and classroom practice, five QUT colleagues report:

Low levels of knowledge of Indigenous cultures, and limited encounters outside of school. [E]xposure to pre- and in-service courses in Indigenous education correlated with higher levels of cultural knowledge and cultural engagement. Teachers with higher levels of cultural knowledge were more likely to attempt to integrate Indigenous knowledges in curriculum and pedagogy” (Luke et al., 2012 ms).

In other words, those teacher training programs could make a difference in how this national curriculum requirement is carried out.

During our visit, we also learned about one of the ways in which parents and other adult members of the Aboriginal community participate in school governance. We interviewed the Aboriginal chair of the Governing Council (mother of two daughters—one now in secondary school, one still here) and sat in on the monthly Council meeting she chaired. The principal, in words and attitude, treated the group with genuine respect, handing out copies of her monthly report, and encouraging discussion. Evidently, student initiatives are routed through the Council for initial discussion. Two recently carried out by students themselves brought brightly painted doors to the student bathrooms, and gift t-shirts for students with perfect attendance that had a student-composed (super-positive) message on the back: "It's deadly cool to attend school".

In conclusion

So far, nothing specific has been said about the goal of all this work—not in Fraser's framework nor in the four schools' efforts. What should it be? "Closing the gap" of course, but what does that mean? The OECD offers one answer in their (2011) comparative analysis of "social justice" in 31 OECD (European and non-European) countries. One dimension (given extra weight in the composite index because of its special importance) is "access to education", and one measure of "access" is the correlation between students' socio-economic background and their academic achievement. In the ranking from best (lowest correlation) to worst (highest correlation), Australia is #25th out of the 31, worse than Canada, New Zealand and the United States, the other Pacific Rim countries with Indigenous populations.

What can be said about a goal more salient to educators' work? Certainly not that all students will receive grades of A or a score of "proficient"; we needn't try to eliminate all individual differences. When the principal of still another Australian school, a large secondary school with 12% Indigenous students was interviewed by a QUT colleague, he expressed one concrete goal worth adopting: matched distributions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students across achievement-level classes. In his words,

[I]f you've got 10% of your Indigenous kids in your senior school, then you should have 10% of your kids in physics and 10 % of your kids in chemistry and "authority English". That's just got to be the expectation around that rather than populating with more Indigenous kids in "English communication".

McNaughton (2011) combines the goals of “acceleration” (as in Gray’s program) and “matched distributions” (as the high school principal understood) as what "being effective" requires. Here are his words, with my interpolated Indigenous application:

The criteria of acceleration and building matched distributions provide both developmental and equity criteria. They are tough but transparent, and require a demonstration that the distribution of achievement has been altered for the [Indigenous] group of students such that there is the same probability for them as for any other child for being in any part of the distribution (high, medium, or low) (p.72).

At the end of his next paragraph, McNaughton (2011) adds, “From what we have learned from the international evidence that is clearly a daunting challenge” (p.72). More optimistically, all efforts toward this goal are worth while.

Notes

¹ This work was supported by funding from the [Australian] Commonwealth Government Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations for the evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project 2009-2013. In Australia, the more inclusive term Indigenous refers to both Aboriginal peoples native to the continent itself and to the Torres Strait Islands peoples native to islands off the north-east coast.

² A new book by New Zealand literacy researcher Stuart McNaughton, 2012, analyses what it takes to accomplish this too-glibly stated policy objective.

³ His website gives access to many published references.

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