'Aboriginal Learning Style' and Culturally Responsive Schooling: Entangled, Entangling, and the Possibilities of Getting Disentangled

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Abstract: Arising from the author's experiences as a high school teacher, and now teacher educator and education researcher, this article is motivated by concerns to do with 'good' schooling practices in connection with Indigenous education in Australia. More specifically, the paper critically considers the enduring and worrying influences of 'Aboriginal learning style theory', alongside considering the possibilities of culturally responsive approaches. While interest in culturally responsive schooling is growing, the argument put forward here is that concomitant with these efforts, more attention needs to be invested into teasing out how and why this approach differs from learning styles in significant ways, such as by focusing on the socio-political consciousness of students in schooling. Thus, a deeper engagement with the cultural politics of education itself may make a useful contribution to the changes needed if education practices are to genuinely move beyond attempting to 'fix' the Indigenous 'problem'.

Key words: Indigenous education; Aboriginal learning style theory; culturally responsive schooling; politics of education.

Period Four: 11.55 – 12.45 with Teacher Ricky, Year 10 English

> *Soon everybody was pissing themselves. (Gwynne, 1998, p. 160)*

Ricky started every lesson reading out loud to the students from the book being studied, *Deadly unna?* (Gwynne, 1998) The students seemed to enjoy this, especially when it came to hearing Ricky swear. At moments like this, eyes would turn in her direction, and staying in character to deliver the line, she would give a little uncomfortable quiver and the collection of faces would turn into full grins. Then Ricky would continue:

> *Shirl almost fell off her stool. Even Mick had a smile on his face. Not Big Mac though. He was cleaning glasses, breathing heavy. Doing his Darth Vader impersonation. Then there came some thumping noises from the Black bar [sic], like furniture was being thrown about. 'Bugger me,' said Tommy. 'Sounds like the bruddas having themselves a corroboree. Better get over there and sort 'em out.'*
> *'Good onya, Tommy.'* ⌞SEP⌟
> *'Chug-a-lug. Chug-a-lug,' said Tommy.*⌞SEP⌟
> *'He's a character ain't he, that Tommy Red?' said the old man, when he'd gone.*
> *'He sure is,' said Slogs. 'Pity there's not more like him out there.'*
> *'Hey,' said Big Mac. 'Did ya hear the one about the boong [sic] and the priest?'*
> *Everybody'd heard the one about the boong [sic] and the priest. But Big Mac started to tell it anyway. (Gwynne, 1998, pp. 160-161)*

Ricky paused, looked in my direction, and asked for clarification on the pronunciation of the offensive word. I felt all the eyes in the class turn in my direction. Ricky had spoken to me before the lesson, expressing a lot of discomfort about the 'joke', and more so, about the use and pronunciation of the 'b' word. She had checked with a number of teachers, and also wanted to check with me. I didn't realise she was going to ask me again in front of the class though, and it was an uncomfortable moment. I hesitantly offered my answer and immediately followed it with a disclaimer regarding how offensive the word was. I am not sure if the students simply accepted or ignored my concern, but a number of students made it clear they disagreed with my pronunciation, with three or four variants echoing around the room before Ricky declared that we didn't need any more attempts on the word, and in agreement, one student added, 'Yeah, it's disgusting.' The reading went on as I sat uneasily wondering about my researcher role and responsibilities, and what was to come next:

> *'Hey, Mac, man's not a camel.' There was somebody at the window.*
> *'I'll be there directly,' yelled Mac. He continued with the joke. 'And the priest says to the truckie, don't worry I got the Black bastard [sic] with the door!' Big Mac burst out laughing, his big gut wobbling like a jelly on a plate. And then he repeated the punch line, just in case we'd missed it.' (Gwynne, 1998, pp. 160-161)*

It was clear that Ricky was uneasy about delivering these sorts of lines. However, she had told me that she didn't see the point in censoring her reading, as it may lead to a more difficult conversation, and these were the lines in the book - this was an important part of analysing a book as part of the English curriculum.

This was not the book that Ricky had originally intended to work with in this class, but when I approached her about being a participant in the study, she volunteered to change her plans and work with *Deadly unna? (*Gwynne, 1998). It was a focus that resulted in some confrontational classroom discussions. On the day Ricky introduced the book, one of the students (Bryce) bluntly asked, 'Miss, why are we *always* learning about Aboriginal stuff?' – a question she didn't engage with at the time, and, dissatisfied with this, Bryce turned to the only Indigenous student in the class, Dean, and asked him. Dean shrugged his shoulders and looked expressionlessly towards the front of the room. Across all my visits to the class, I didn't hear Dean offer a comment on the book. The first thing that Ricky got the students to do was examine the front and back cover, and then have a chat about the book's themes. It was agreed that likely topics would include cultural differences, racism, friendship and sport, and in the following few lessons, these were the themes that class discussion largely focused on.

Introduction

The vignette from Ricky's classroom was constructed from observations for a study undertaken during 2011 (all names are pseudonyms). The project was in a suburban high school in Brisbane, with the investigation looking at teacher practices in connection with concerns to do with race. In the context of this discussion, the vignette is pertinent as it draws attention to a collection of concerns that will be developed across the paper. For example, the discomfort and troubled confidence of Ricky in relation to the teaching of and about racialised relationships, and the positioning and responses of students in terms of what was being learnt. More implicit, but nonetheless also relevant, are links with broader policy issues such as the professional standards that require all teachers to include Indigenous perspectives

in the curriculum, the academic achievements of Indigenous students,[1] and the numbers of Indigenous students completing high school. The scenario playing out between Ricky, Dean, Bryce and the other students is arguably quite typical in this sense, yet this banality also serves to mask the complexities of the matters they are negotiating if they are to meaningfully respond in the social justice spirit of the contemporary education policy environment. Moreover, the story from the classroom opens up lines for thinking about the challenges for teacher education and professional learning, if wide-spread and sustained improvement is to be achieved. An underlying motivation of this paper is to constructively contribute to the well intentioned efforts of teachers such as Ricky, and education practices broadly, to more effectively respond to students such as Dean, so that they don't end up passively disengaging from schooling.

Across the education sector in Australia there continues to be ongoing concern expressed regarding the experiences and achievements of Indigenous students (Gray & Beresford, 2008; Santoro et al, 2011). Stories featuring this regularly appear in the public domain, with the annual Prime Minister's Report on 'Closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage' providing one high profile example that ensures the topic is revisited (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Linked with this are debates regarding the role and influence of the National curriculum, and more pointedly, the 'cross-curriculum priorities' that are designed to provide all students with opportunities to engage with Aboriginal knowledges, histories, and perspectives in the classroom (Salter & Maxwell, 2016). Understandably, these conversations spill over into higher education and the preparation of future educators, and in recent years there have been moves to ensure that initial teacher educators experience at a minimum some form of compulsory course work that addresses Indigenous education (Thorpe & Burgess, 2016). This was the case at the university where I am based, with a compulsory undergraduate course that I coordinate introduced for the first time in 2016.

It is likely that few people involved with education would disagree with the import of these initiatives. However, it is arguably equally fair to say that there remains widespread disagreement regarding the most suitable approach for making improvements to the experiences/achievements of Indigenous students, as well as the practices in relation to the teaching of knowledges, histories or perspectives that they are connected with. There are unresolved tensions that underpin the reasoning for some of the disagreement; for example, many students become targeted in terms of social justice-oriented activities that take a homogenising and essentialising sweep, which all too often tarnishes all Indigenous students as somehow failing (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Concurrent with this are curriculum and pedagogical practices in which the students problematically become entangled with Indigenous studies as an object of study; as something to be examined, understood, celebrated, and pitied (Hickling-Hudson, 2010; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Within these sorts of conditions, it seems unlikely that educational conversations or practices are likely to achieve anything more than reproducing deficit understandings and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia (Fforde et al, 2013). Furthermore, given the relatively poor improvement evidenced in the experiences and achievements of Indigenous students as a group, if we accept the annual Prime Minister's 'Closing the Gap report' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017), perhaps it is time to ask different questions and pursue practices that actively address the systemic constraints that seem to be actively fostered under the current arrangements.

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[1] In the current national policy context, the term Indigenous is used in reference to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Across this paper I will also use these terms in alignment with this policy framing, however I would like to acknowledge that these are problematic and contested terms, and it is not my intention here to be offensive.

As with others involved with education, I find much to agree with one such direction currently being canvassed: what is referred to as a *culturally responsive* approach to schooling (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lewthwaite et al, 2015; Perso & Hayward, 2015). This is a perspective and set of practices that are premised on valuing the 'cultural wealth' that students arrive at school with as the key resources used as the basis of teaching and learning (Alim & Paris, 2017). While more will be said about this later, it is worth noting at this stage that this is not a simplistic celebratory trope designed to make schooling more culturally safe and welcoming (Sleeter, 2012). To be clear, these too are important dimensions of systemic change required from an institution that historically and continues to be hostile for many Indigenous students (Sarra, 2011). However, at its core a culturally responsive approach to schooling is designed to meaningfully find ways of addressing the socio-political consciousness of students – it is a philosophy and set of practices designed to actively interrupt the dominant cultural politics of schooling and the broader community (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Across the last few years as I have worked to advocate and model my understanding of culturally responsive schooling (henceforth, CRS), both in teacher education and the research projects that I am involved, one of the major impediments that I have repeatedly encountered stems from the stubborn persistence of thinking that appears to be linked with 'Aboriginal learning style theory' (Nakata, 2003; Nicholls et al, 1998; Scott, 2010). This too will be discussed in more depth later, as the underpinning ambition of this paper is to critically consider the entangled relationship shared between CRS and 'learning styles', with a view to teasing out how and why distinguishing between them more clearly and convincingly may make a useful contribution to the sorts of changes that are needed if education practices are to genuinely move beyond attempting to 'fix' the Indigenous 'problem'.

Entangled in the 'Problem'

My personal familiarity with Indigenous education took shape in earnest as a post-graduate teacher education student in 2005. At the time, I was surprised to find that the only meaningful encounter with discussions about the experiences of Indigenous students was in a course about physical impairments impacting on teaching and learning. The focus was thus on addressing concerns such as poor eyesight, hearing, attention deficit disorder, and post-traumatic stress. While not wanting to downplay the import or significant impact that these issues can have on schooling, at the time they did not strike me as being particular to the Indigenous community. Nor was there any meaningful engagement that offered any cautionary insights regarding negative understandings taking shape if there is an absence of critically reflective and nuanced investigation of issues such as context, representation, or socio-historical considerations. As a history teacher in training, I encountered a curriculum that unsurprisingly provided few opportunities for teaching and learning focused on relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across the colonial period, but I also noted that these were typically optional lines of study. It was apparent, then, that it would be all too easy for history teachers to develop school programs that simply - and likely - served to repeat silences and reproduce celebratory nation-building narratives.

Subsequently, starting in 2006 as a high school teacher in the same school with Ricky and Dean (he started in 2009), mentoring about how to work with Indigenous students largely came from senior teachers. I received comments such as, 'Don't expect much from them academically; count on their behaviour to be disruptive; and come down on them hard and don't expect any support from home.' And when teaching in the history classroom, during lessons investigating nation-building events, I encountered student comments expressing

disinterest, coupled with dismissive derision about the role and experiences of Indigenous peoples. During 2008, when national literacy and numeracy testing was getting underway (drawing further attention to the achievements of Indigenous students) and curriculum reforms in Queensland were moving to make it compulsory to embed Indigenous content, I also became increasingly conscious of the negative framing of some conversations in staff meetings. In common, both my teacher education and early schooling experiences fostered a perspective that teachers are in a professional position to 'help', it is moral imperative to do so, and there are policy mechanisms in place to hold us to account.

Now, in my role as an education researcher and coordinator of a compulsory undergraduate Indigenous education course, I worry about the implications for students and teachers that arise from being entangled in these discourses. How can I work towards interrupting the development of a sense of paternalism and benevolent social justice, which I now see as maintaining the status quo? What sorts of skills and knowledges are required of future educators if they are to meaningfully work towards 'fixing' the system, rather than students? How can teachers be assisted with generating the commitment and resolve that will sustain them despite the pressures of accountability metrics and potential conflict with other (more senior) teachers? How can teachers be effectively and appropriately prepared to engage with the politics of the curriculum and pedagogical practices in connection with Indigenous knowledges being compulsory in all classrooms?

While I may not have thorough answers to all these questions, and the responses that I do have are likely to fall short for a great many people, surely the alternative of avoiding engaging with these lines of questioning is not the solution either. Ultimately, it is important to ask … as I do of the educators that I work with … who am I, as a White, male, educated and able bodied 'success' story of the education system, in trying to contribute to these debates and practices? With this, I do find some encouragement from remembering the point that was impressed upon me several years ago: it was non-Indigenous people that largely created the current mess, and shifting responsibility onto Indigenous people and community to 'fix' the problem is not the solution. Change in this sense, must start with and come from educators and the system itself (Santoro et al, 2011). And this is not to suggest that Indigenous peoples should not be actively sought out and involved in the process. There are however, responsibilities that come with one's personal history and socio-political location, and acknowledging this then requires a commitment to developing a more nuanced understanding of what I/we can and should be taking action on. An important starting point with this for me, and as is often encouraged in contributions of this nature (see Gray & Beresford, 2008; Santoro et al, 2011; Sarra, 2011), is learning to be more critically informed and active regarding addressing concerns to do with race, racism, and cultural politics as organising logics underpinning the education 'problem'.

Unpacking the 'Problems' of Race and Culture in Education

> *Like an anchor in the ocean, [culture] is rooted to some place—for many Indigenous peoples, the seafloor is the lands on which they live and their ancestors lived and roamed before them. The anchor shifts and sways, like culture, with the changing tides, ebbs, and flows of the ocean or the life, contexts, and situations for Indigenous peoples. (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 943)*

While race is not 'real' in the sense that it is now well established that there is no biological basis to there being more than one human race, there remains a very real dimension to race and racism in terms of influencing the experiences and opportunities of people and groups

(Leonardo, 2009). Race, in this sense, is better understood as something that has effects in and on the world, hence race is meaningful and knowable, and importantly, race is given meaning and made meaningful by people. Race is (re)made in and through discourse, involving practices such as how people move, look, and interact with each other and the world around them (Knowles, 2003). Race is communicative and relational; there are 'grammars' of race that are learned and shared between people (Carbado, 2002). Race is fundamentally relational; in Australia, 'Aboriginality' can be understood as a 'social thing' that is (re)made in and through social interactions in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples 'negotiate a place in relation to each other' (Langton, 1993, p. 31). This is also relationally linked with the (re)making of Whiteness as a set of ideas, practices, and representations that are (re)constructed as valuable and desirable (Moran, 2007). Thus, race-making involves the construction of subjectivity because it is a process implicated in developing a sense of self in the world, of one's capacities, position and relationships (Knowles, 2003, pp. 31-32). One's sense of location in the world is also then linked with broader group identities, what can loosely be referred to as racialised identities, although this view must equally acknowledge that 'identities are not considered to be an essential essence coming from within an individual, but are negotiated reactions to social norms coming from without and are therefore historically and socially situated' (Chadderton, 2013, p. 48).

The schooling sector has a long and troubled history in terms of effectively addressing the presence and effects of race. Leonardo and Grubb (2014, p. 58) recently offered a succinct account that outlines key underlying issues such as, 'In schools, communities of color become a problem for an educational system that vacillates between assimilating them into Eurocentrism and forsaking them as drains on the system'. Hinted at here and something that is often framed as a follow-on concern, the 'cultural gap' between teacher and student backgrounds (c/f Santoro et al, 2011). Teaching remains a profession largely staffed by people who are white (i.e. English speaking, Christian, financially stable, heterosexual, able-bodied and from geographically desirable backgrounds), whereas the student cohorts are increasingly diverse - read as culturally and linguistically non-white (Vass, 2017). In Australia, the vast majority of teachers come from this sort of white background, whereas the national Indigenous population is 3%.[2] This means that for the foreseeable future it is likely that Indigenous students will be in classrooms with non-Indigenous teachers, and this latter group will continue being responsible for the teaching of Indigenous studies in schools. Caution is warranted in relation to over-emphasising complications arising from the mismatch between teacher and student background, as noted by Ladson-Billings (2009) and Gay (2010), it is misleading and actively unhelpful to suggest that teachers are in some way not capable of learning about and working with the cultural backgrounds of students – and in some instances, a shared cultural background can also be problematic. Having said this, there is much to agree with Santoro and colleagues (2011) regarding the important role and influence that Indigenous teachers can (and should) play in this process, but this also requires a willingness to genuinely listen and learn from these contributions. It is also worth noting there are very few Indigenous teachers, just 0.7% of the profession in 2011 according to Santoro et al, so it would be unhelpful to frame this as the solution.

Echoing sentiments put forward by Applebaum (2010) regarding 'good intentions' not being enough, Leonardo and Grubb (2014, p. 58) also note that 'despite the best of intentions, teachers may still perceive students of color as lacking certain cultural competencies by virtue of being different'. A significant worry then, is that schooling continues its colonial legacy of pursuing a 'civilizing mission' of making 'them' more like 'us', and as cautioned by Sarra (2011), all too often this creates conditions with the false

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[2] Watkins and colleagues (2013, p. 13) note that while the 'cultural make-up' of the teacher profile in Australia remains predominantly white, the workforce should be understood as comprising increasing cultural and linguistic complexity.

choice for some students: success in schooling requires compromising their Indigenous identity in problematic ways. With this in mind, his 'strong and smart' philosophy calls for educators to work with students in ways that actively supports having both a strong Indigenous identity grounded in community, while simultaneously being academically successful in schooling (Sarra, 2011). This then, is moving closer towards CRS, rather than a culturally assimilatory approach. For this sort of philosophy and set of practices to truly take hold, educators must deliberately shift their understanding of and relationships with Indigenous families and communities, and this concurrently must involve reconsidering how and why their culture can serve as a source of knowledge and strength that has much to offer schooling (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014; Lewthwaite, 2015; Santoro et al, 2011).

Up to this point, I have not explicitly addressed concerns linked with the culture concept itself - perhaps this is overdue for some. The ease with which the culture concept is deployed belies its contentious and violent history. The worries stem from the culture concept being grounded in anthropology, and in the Australian setting Nakata (2007) has offered a thorough critique of the discipline's roots and ongoing influences. Drawing on Nakata's early work in regards to education more specifically, McConaghy's (2000) oft-cited work describing the effects of 'culturalism' are worth being cautiously mindful of; however, engaging in depth with these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. A detailed critique of this work was undertaken by Sarra (2011) as he forcefully makes the case that it misleading and disrespectful to be overly deterministic and negative regarding the construction of the culture concept and it being ascribed on and to Indigenous peoples. Instead, Sarra (2011, p. 49) argues the merits of emphasising the lived experiences of Aboriginal Australians, and moreover, that 'their capacity for transcendence' in terms of the cultural resources called on for survival and self-determination, needs to be better acknowledged. In other words, despite all the hostility and violence directed towards Indigenous peoples and communities, a cultural strength, vitality and sense of connectedness must be valued and actively worked with. The quote that opens this section, from Castagno and Brayboy (2008), encourages thinking about culture as being simultaneously fluid and fixed, helpful and at times a hindrance, something people have a connection with and strong opinions on. Hence, a complex and contested understanding of culture is taken up in this paper.

Educators as 'Cultural Workers'

Across my involvement with education, I have increasingly come to view the role and influence of language as an important and powerful dimension of schooling that is often downplayed or overlooked. In response to this, I have found the work of Giroux (2005) useful with reconceptualising a view of educators as being 'cultural workers'. For Giroux (2005), the daily work of teachers involves them in *border pedagogies*, and by this he means that a primary facet of teaching entails the establishing, protecting, and maintaining of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. As he explains it, 'central to the notion of border pedagogy is an understanding of how the relationship between power and knowledge works as both the practice of representation and the representation of practice to secure particular forms of authority' (2005, p. 21). For example, on an everyday basis, teachers will communicate that 'this' instead of 'that' behaviour is desirable and acceptable, 'this' representation is more familiar and suitable than 'that' one, 'this' idea has more merit and value than 'that' one, and so on. Teachers in this sense are an authority and in a position to legitimate particular behaviours, representations and ideas.

This is the basis of 'social reproduction' in the spirit evoked by the work of Bourdieu, with certain behaviours, representations and ideas having more cultural capital than others in

the classroom (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014, p. 61). Those students who share a similar set of cultural resources with those of the teacher are more likely to feel a sense of inclusion, comfort, and value. These cultural capitals are not always addressed explicitly and openly by teachers, as they more often tend to be framed implicitly by silence, body language, or in other opaque ways. Hence, the extension of this is also the premise for the concerns raised about the 'hidden curriculum', whereby omissions and deflections (for example) serve to highlight the capitals that are and are not valued in the classroom (Giroux & Penna, 1979). Importantly, Giroux (2005) did not view teachers as mere dupes that were powerless or unaware, but instead he argued that they are powerfully located to challenge, transform and redefine 'borders'. In his words, 'border pedagogy shifts the emphasis of the knowledge/power relationship away from the limited emphasis on the mapping of domination toward the politically strategic issue of engaging in the ways in which knowledge can be remapped, reterritorialized, and decentered' (2005, p. 22).

On an abstract or theoretical level, teachers are taught about the dangers of social reproduction and the hidden curriculum; indeed, in my experience, applied versions of these concepts such as the metaphor of students arriving at school with different *virtual school bags* (Thompson, 2002), are eagerly taken up by initial teacher educators. However, substantial concern remains in terms of how effectively or adequately they are prepared to negotiate their roles and responsibilities as 'cultural workers' engaged in 'border pedagogy' in connection with Indigenous education (Santoro et al, 2011). This is hinted at in the classroom vignette included earlier, as despite the well-intentioned social justice learning outcomes that may have been planned for, what the students were ultimately invited to learn was much more problematic – this is in terms of both the official and unofficial knowledges on offer in the classroom (Giroux & Penna, 1979). As shown in the vignette, language was much more than simply a medium of communication; rather, language was the mechanism through which meaning and value was attached to particular ideas, practices and representations. Ultimately, then, it is difficult to imagine that many, if any, of the students in the classroom experienced learning that encouraged questioning, challenging or interrupting an understanding of whiteness as remaining dominant in the racial and cultural axis of power in Australia.

'Aboriginal Learning Style' Theory

Aboriginal learning style theory is based on the idea that the ways that Indigenous people learn are different to non-Indigenous ways of learning, and importantly, this difference is viewed as arising from cultural and contextual differences (Nicholls, et al 1998). The theory has roots going back to the 1970s and the work of Harris in the Northern Territory (Harrison & Sellwood, 2016). This was a time coinciding with changes following on from the 1967 referendum, which for the first time enabled federal policies and responses to Indigenous communities, resulting in efforts such as a national Aboriginal education committee being formed in the mid 1970s (Vass, 2012). The context (a small community in the far north) and the time (post-civil rights era and an enabled national policy platform) are worth keeping in mind with regards to the concerns that have been raised about Aboriginal learning style theory. Comments from Nakata (2003, p. 9) offer a cautionary reminder of why this may be the case:

> *I do not have any problem with the learning-styles work of people like Harris (1990). He worked from and for a particular context, with a particular goal in mind. His explanations and the models and strategies that emerged from those may well be appropriate to that context, and suitable for the goals that were*

being pursued. But it is the transference of those ideas into other contexts or even just into popular understanding that leads to ambiguity and confusion.

In essence, what Harris described and the 'learning style' practices he outlined are themselves not necessarily the core concern, but their subsequent uptake and use far and wide as a theoretical framework that explains how and why Aboriginal students learn across Australia is far more problematic.

Nearly twenty years ago an important critique of the theory was put forward by Nicholls and colleagues (1998), with many of their concerns being as relevant today as they were then. As observed by these authors, there were originally five key concepts and strategies discussed: Indigenous students learn through observation and imitation; trial and error; in context; in hands-on, skills-based ways, and person/relationship oriented practices. There were benefits stemming from the ideas put forward; notably, the theory challenged notions of Indigenous people being uneducable and culturally deprived, and positively highlighted that Indigenous ideas and approaches to learning were legitimate in their own right (Nicholls et al, 1998). However, from the outset, the theory was also problematically flawed, maintaining the use of simply being Indigenous as a scapegoat for poor achievement; reproducing reductive and binary perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; describing approaches to learning that are well suited to all students; and further developing assumptions that Indigenous students are not able to 'learn' in formal education settings (Nicholls et all, 1998). Hence, Aboriginal learning style theory raises serious concerns regarding the perpetuation of deficit and stereotypical thinking about students and communities.

Learning style theory thus also resonates with and remains imbued by the sorts of concerns addressed by *culturalism*; in essence, the idea that cultural differences are used loosely as explanatory rationales for (compensatory) educational strategies and responses (Nakata, 2003, 2007; McConaghy, 2000). Keeping in mind Sarra's (2011) important critique of this line of thinking, it is also worthwhile to consider Nakata's (2003) concerns with what he describes as the 'cultural dilemma'. For Nakata (2003, p. 8), one of the difficulties of establishing and enacting education policies with Indigenous students in mind stems from the key tension of 'upholding and maintaining cultural difference and identity on the one hand, and producing equal outcomes to make us competitive in the mainstream on the other hand'. In essence, he argues that there is a contradiction underpinning the dual aspirations of pursuing both cultural maintenance, jointly with equity of outcomes – in targeting both, they undermine each other (Nakata, 2003, p. 9). In his view, the exaggerated emphasis that is placed on understanding and engaging with 'difference' serves as a distraction. In this reading, then, learning style theory potentially exonerates well-intentioned teachers, contributes to narrowing the curriculum and pedagogy, and ultimately runs the risk of deflecting attention from issues of critical literacy, or engaging with meta-knowledge and the politics of knowledge construction, and more explicitly teaching the culture of power.[3]

In my own experience in teacher education, I was taught about and encouraged to use the simplistic, homogenising, and binary-organised Indigenous learning style framework– a practice I also witnessed later as an educator during professional development, and I continue to see used into the present, albeit with some cautionary caveats. The framing can be somewhat implicit, such as Santoro et al (2011, p. 68) drawing attention to an evidence base supporting the view that 'Indigenous people learn in practical ways involving observation and doing'. More worryingly, in some respects, the merits of the theory and core premises are more explicitly expounded in teacher education texts. For example, in the 2011 edition of

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[3] Santoro et al (2011) also engage with the work of Nakata (2003), drawing attention to the legacies of learning style theory that can negatively shape the view that teachers hold of Indigenous students, which can hence lead to concerning classroom practices.

Harrison's text, he encourages engagement with the framework, while also noting that 'we need to recognise that any discussion of learning styles is always highly contested' (p. 39). A few years later, in the next edition, with co-author Sellwood, (2016, p. 79), the claim is once again advanced that the early work of Harris (and Christie) holds relevance for classrooms today, despite also conceding that 'it is dangerous to put all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students under the umbrella of 'visual' or 'collaborative' learners' (p. 71). They also offer examples such as Indigenous students sometimes not realising that independent and student-centred learning is a highly valued skill among teachers, which can lead to situations where students become upset when the teacher sets a task and leaves them to do it alone (Harrison & Sellwood, 2016). Invariably, the practices associated with learning style theory could potentially be relevant for any student, irrespective of their background, raising concerns about the dangers of singling Indigenous students out in these ways.

It seems a worthwhile undertaking, then, to critically (re)consider the role, use and influence of these sorts of texts, particularly when thinking about the understanding, relationships, and expectations educators are being invited to (re)establish with Indigenous students. Consider the following,

> *'If students are going to succeed, they must accept that what they learn today may be of no immediate value, and that schooling is often a matter of learning fundamental skills that will be useful later. However, research and experience suggest that many* **Aboriginal students are not prepared to sit there and wait for the future** *to come along. They will stay away or wait until they can leave school ... ' (Harrison & Sellwood, 2016, p. 85)*

There are two immediate issues of concern here. Firstly, the use of vague 'research' as an evidence base that justifies or in some way explains Indigenous student disengagement and disinterest, and secondly, that this is an everyday and unsurprising position that teachers can expect to see and accept. Echoing many of the ideas put forward by the Indigenous educators that Santoro and colleagues interviewed (2011), Harrison and Sellwood (2016, p. 86) expands on this to offer a range of suggestions to assist teachers when working with Aboriginal students: flexibility of teaching approach; flexibility of approach to bureaucracy; relaxation of rules and expectations connected with Standard English; genuine listening; choosing responsive and engaging teaching materials/sources; addressing racist behaviour and its impacts; and consulting with Indigenous education support workers and community. There is a lot to merit the practices being advocated here, but other than the final item on the list, again I can't help but ask, which student wouldn't want a teacher doing these things? Does it have to be framed as something to better understand and work with Indigenous students in particular?

In a similar vein, a recent contribution from Perso and Hayward (2015, p. 118) emphasises the import of attending to 'Aboriginal culture, learning and ways of learning'. In this case, substantial reference is made to the '8 Ways Framework', meaning it relies heavily on the work of Yunkaporta and the research he undertook in a region of Western New South Wales.[4] As explained by Perso and Hayward (2015), this is an approach that maintains that there are strong connections between culture and learning, advocating for teachers to learn about the cultural backgrounds of students and communities, and then draw on this cultural framework in support of teaching and learning. Resonating with earlier versions of the theory, context, relationships, and language/communication are central, with the caveats that what works in one context may not be relevant or appropriate in another. Yet it is also advocated that the practices 'are not just for remote Indigenous people', they are potentially

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[4] As with the work of Harris in the 1970s, the context (a localised region) and timing (movement towards State-wide compulsory Indigenous education policy reform), has arguably played a significant role influencing the scope, scale, and use of the 8 Ways Framework.

relevant when teaching any Indigenous student, 'regardless of where you are working or the cultural backgrounds of your students' (Perso & Hayward, 2015, p. 125). It is perhaps worth noting, however, that the original thesis from Yunkaporta (2009) was focused on the politics and contestations of knowledge systems, and from this, to apply Aboriginal pedagogies to the project of constructively interrupting the dominance of Western knowledge systems in schooling. While he does encourage improvements in regards to the experiences and achievements of Indigenous students, it is perhaps worth considering why this was not a primary focus of this text. It seems reasonable to suggest that perhaps he was rightly cautious regarding the potential for his ideas and practices to be taken up naively and superficially as being *for* Indigenous students, as often appears the case.

Ultimately, the widespread take-up of the 8 Ways Framework and the ongoing presence of ideas linked with Aboriginal learning style theory in contemporary teacher education texts speaks to the enduring appeal of 'learning styles' more broadly, which Scott (2010) argues remain a 'fad' characterised by 'conceptual confusion', despite being critiqued for decades. Part of the worry, according to Scott (2010, p. 14), is that 'rather than being of no particular consequence, the continuing endorsement of "learning styles" wastes teaching and learning time, promotes damaging stereotypes about individuals and interferes with the development of evidence-based best practice'. While I concur with the concerns raised by Scott (2010), it is not my intention here to be unhelpfully critical of the examples discussed above, as it is important to acknowledge that part of the difficulty stems from the demarcating of 'Indigenous education' itself, a view also hinted at by Nakata (2003). A key challenge remains for the education community to re-imagine how 'we' can talk about improving the experiences and achievements of Indigenous students, without identifying them in some way as a 'problem' group, and then generating strategies with this very group in mind. It seems there is indeed 'a fine line between having a problem to solve and becoming a problem' (Young, 2004 as cited in Santoro et al, 2011, p. 69). The other salient point to consider is to question just how and why 'learning styles' may differ from the CRS - culturally responsive schooling - that myself and others are calling for. On the surface, this too is a culturally based framework of understanding and engaging with Indigenous students, so does it suffer from the same problematic legacies and limitations?

Towards Cultural 'Strengths' and 'Resource' Pedagogies

> *Culturally responsive pedagogy concentrates on recognizing the knowledge, skills, and rich cultural experiences that students from diverse backgrounds bring to school. It is a philosophical view of teaching grounded in nurturing students' welfare, including their academic, psychological, social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing. (Taylor & Sobel, 2011, p. 22)*

CRS is a 'strengths-based' framework, and as with the 'strong and smart' philosophy and practices of Sarra (2011), the starting point requires challenging 'how people perceive, talk and think about teaching and learning in the context of Aboriginal education' (Fforde et al, 2013, p. 168). It is helpful to keep in mind that taking up this framework does not require 'White teachers to adopt cultures of color', it does however require an 'openness to non-White ways as legitimate even if they seem strangely different' (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014, p. 66). CRS, in this sense, is designed to do more than build cultural bridges or establish cultural safety in schooling; rather, the home cultural practices are understood as being of central value to extending teaching and learning in the classroom (Paris, 2012). In other words, the culture of home and community become the basis of the school curriculum and pedagogical practices on offer.

This is a framework that has connections back to the work of Moll and colleagues (1992) and the development of the 'funds of knowledge' (FoK) approach, research that highlighted how and why the accumulated cultural knowledges, skills, and beliefs/values that sustain home/community well-being are indispensable resources to be drawn on for schooling practices. As Leonardo and Grubb (2014, p. 69) explain it,

> *'A funds of knowledge approach to minority communities opposes the deficit orientation by considering the worth of people according to their own standards regarding what knowledge is of most worth and value, and not from an external lens that disparages them'.*

In other words, this is an approach to education that starts from the premise that students arrive with valuable cultural capital, and it is the responsibility of educators to acquire enough of an understanding, appreciation, and familiarity to enable them to work with students and the local community. In some respects, it is therefore the teachers that are positioned as requiring some form of 'fixing', rather than the students, and hence CRS moves a long way from the sort of compensatory and deficit undercurrent that remains influential to 'learning style' frameworks.

When thinking about what CRS is, there are a number of different, but linked, terms that have been used: reference to cultural wealth/assets, appropriate, relevant, responsive, and more recently sustaining approaches are some of the more frequently encountered variants. For some, notable here may be the omission of *multicultural*, which is not being included as it has a somewhat problematic trajectory linked with the civil rights movements in the US (see Banks, 2014). Additionally, in the Australian setting, multicultural discourses run the risk of deflecting attention from key political issues of concern to Indigenous people and communities, such as sovereignty, treaties, and self-determination (Vass, 2017). In many ways, the cultural-wealth-based terms share much in common and collectively resonate with the definition that opens this section from Taylor and Sobel (2011), which I find to be a useful starting point for outlining the scope and scale of what is involved with moving towards taking up CRS. Building on this then, as recently outlined by one of the leading contributors, Gay (2010), there are five guiding principles:

- Culture counts;
- *Conventional reform is inadequate;*
- *Intention without action is insufficient;*
- *There is strength and vitality with/from the linguistic and cultural diversity of students; and*
- *Test scores and grades are symptoms, not causes, of achievement problems.*

Another leading figure that comes from a slightly different perspective, but nonetheless resonates with this, Ladson-Billings (2014) puts forward three intertwined dimensions as underpinning CRS: intellectual growth, intercultural knowledge and fluency, and socio-political consciousness. Recently, the work of Paris (2012) sought to extend these ideas and practices by encouraging what he describes as a culturally *sustaining* approach that actively cares for the home/community cultural practices while *simultaneously* cultivating dominant cultural capacities. This iteration of the approach 'seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling' (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

In this way, CRS can be understood as aiming to constructively address the 'cultural dilemma' (Nakata, 2003) by actively working to simultaneously sustain 'within-group' (Indigenous) and 'across-group' (wider Australian) cultural practices, despite the constraints imposed by an education policy climate that remains focused on creating a 'monocultural and monolingual society based on White, middle-class norms of language and cultural being' (Paris, 2012, p. 95). As Alim and Paris (2017, p. 1) explain, the aim of contemporary

schooling needs to be reset around accepting and working with the linguistic, literate and cultural pluralism that better reflects the schooling student body. For too long, efforts in this area have been undertaken in acceptance of White-centered concerns that have targeted getting 'this' group, e.g., Indigenous students, to 'speak/write/be' more like the white students that have been successful in the past, and instead educators must offer a 'critical, emancipatory vision of schooling that reframes the object of critique from our children to oppressive systems' (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 3).

The need for working with CRS has arguably never been more important, according to Sleeter (2012), with the last 20 years of educational reforms infused with neo-liberal thinking and practices with a global reach, negatively impacting on those who would most benefit from the approach. As she also observes, empirical research that highlights the merits of CRS remains relatively 'thin', and further developments in this area must be concomitant with political work that more forcefully holds the current education policy climate to account. A concern linked with this is the reliance on small scale research that has shown the potential benefits of CRS in localised contexts in terms of positively impacting on student engagement in learning, but making the connection with systemic wide reforms has been less effective (Sleeter, 2012). A notable and valuable exception to this however, comes from the New Zealand multi-phase school reform project started in 2001, *Te Kotahitanga*, which has demonstrably shown sustained and wide-spread improvements in student participation, engagement, retention and achievement in schooling (Bishop et al, 2014). In Australia, efforts are also now being directed towards establishing a similar sort of evidence base; for example, a group of researchers in north Queensland are undertaking a three-year study with schools spanning a vast geographic space (Lewthwaite et al, 2015). Albeit on a smaller scale, the current three-year project I am involved with across a cluster of schools in Sydney is also working towards this.[5]

Concluding Thoughts

While the research evidence base in support of CRS may indeed be 'thin' in general, this is even more the case when considering Australia. In a recent review of literature, Krakouer (2015) found a total of just 24 sources that looked specifically at CRS in relation to Indigenous education, and despite the evident limitations of this, she reiterates the import of encouraging educators to more genuinely and effectively respond to the cultural dimensions of schooling. She also notes that the importance of schooling being contextually responsive in relation to the heterogeneity of Indigenous students, the role of collaborative relationships between schools and community, and the professional development and support offered to educators. In a recent contribution, Burgess and Evans (2017) echo these very sentiments; however, hinting at the complexity of the task ahead, they also note that this is not something to be taken on solely by teachers, but there must also be committed leadership that assists and opens pathways for systemic change. The import of these points cannot be emphasised enough. However, in addition to improving the evidence base in connection with CRS, more broadly I would encourage future contributions concerning Indigenous education to attend carefully to the role and influence of Aboriginal learning style theory undermining these efforts and ultimately maintaining the status quo.

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[5] This is in reference to the *Culture, Community, Curriculum Project* (CCCP), a study partially funded by the Ian Potter Foundation. It entails teachers and community members working together to produce, refine, and deliver classroom teaching and learning over two semesters of each school year. The project is currently mid-way through the three-year life of the funding.

The legacies and history of efforts that have failed to effectively ameliorate the injustices experienced by many Indigenous students in schooling since the 1970s goes a long way to attesting to the poor contribution that learning style theory has made so far. In some respects, while this approach does ask educators to understand and respond in some ways to the cultural background and context of students, as argued above, it tends to do so in simplistic ways that serve to reduce quality, depth, and diversity of learning experiences offered to many Indigenous students. In my view, there are two key points of distinction worth highlighting in concluding this paper. Firstly, a CRS approach has the distinct advantage of being engaged with as a clean slate in the sense that it does not come weighed down by re-establishing binary understanding, relationships, or power-hierarchies between teachers and students. Rather, the invitation is for the teacher to learn about the diversity and complexity of the local school community, and for there to be a change in the power relationships between educators and learning communities. The other, and arguably more important, reason for meaningfully working with CRS in schooling is that it prioritises the creation and delivery of teaching and learning experiences that address the socio-political consciousness of students by engaging with meta-knowledges, the politics of knowledge construction, and critical literacies that are empowering within and beyond the local context (Nakata 2003; Sarra, 2011).

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