

Article summary:

Pathways to progress? - Collective conscientisation and progressive school reform in Aboriginal education

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Introduction

Current education policy regarding practices in Aboriginal education is at a critical point. One of the important directions is 'the move away from whitefellas telling bla(c)k people what is good for them', a move which highlights the importance of 'listening more responsively to Aboriginal people themselves' (p. 312). This scoping article argues that a whole of school change in collective critical consciousness is vital for sustained changes to more socially just and culturally nourishing pedagogy (teaching and learning practices).

The authors argue that 'listening responsively' is a process of collective critical consciousness raising through thinking and acting differently in ways that challenge the dominant ways that schooling as an institution has engaged with teachers, learners and the community.

Conscientisation – or consciousness raising – can be understood as a way of bringing together ideas and material circumstances to become different and thereby to influence and contribute to wider change.

What is conscientisation?

Conscientisation is a concept evolving from Brazilian educator/ philosopher Paolo Freire's critiques of Western education systems as oppressive. For Freire, Western education was based on a 'banking model', whereby teachers deposited curriculum content into the heads of learners as a mode of control or oppression, and where the learner role was to file and store the deposits, so that they could give them back to the teacher in the way that they were taught. In such a system, societal inequities are maintained. Freire argued that it was through critical consciousness about the inequities of such systems that people could make changes towards more equitable systems. (The use of the word 'critical' here is not about general criticism or

about being negative – it is a word which links to questioning how power works to advantage some and disadvantage others.)

Extending thinking about conscientisation

Collectivity

The authors of this paper do not dispute the role of Freire's thinking about conscientisation; however they extend it to emphasise the critical importance of *collective* (rather than individual) consciousness and actions, noting that

Both individuals and groups can work hand in hand, but the liberation of the individual without the advancement of community in the context of Aboriginal education would only be a partial success. (p. 316)

In line with emphasis on collective consciousness, this paper highlights the collective impact and systemic nature of colonial education systems. The impact of removal from Country, family, language and spirituality was collective because it was experienced by and continues to impact generations of Aboriginal peoples. These removals and erasures were not inflicted by isolated individuals, they were institutionally organised and implemented across the system.

Connection to Country

The authors further contest the way that 'advancement' in Freire's way of thinking is understood from a purely human perspective, as if people can independently act to change the world. Instead, they recommend a mind shift that brings together connection to Country with perspectives of people and communities. This mind shift requires understanding the complete interrelationship between Country and people that exists for Aboriginal people. This goes beyond considering 'connection to Country' within a belief system, to understanding it as experienced holistically across past, present, and future dimensions.

The Culturally Nourishing Schooling project

The authors describe the Culturally Nourishing School project as a 'multi-site whole-school approach which aims to change schooling, policies and pedagogic practices to improve Indigenous students' success in Australia' (p. 320). The project responds to both the failure of schooling to meet Indigenous students' holistic learning needs and the calls from Indigenous communities for education which provides connection, respect and value for cultural knowledges and ways of being. It prioritises the interrelationship between communities and Country.

Across the strategies employed through the project is a thread of critical consciousness raising:

- involving teachers, community members and researchers to re-consider taken for granted educational policy and practices from an Indigenous standpoint
- negotiating and agreeing on new ways of working between schools and community
- developing curricula and pedagogical practices to improve the experiences and learning outcomes of Indigenous students.

Processes of critical consciousness raising

Importantly, the authors emphasise that the process of raising consciousness is not linear or aimed at coming to a simple agreement about goals or outcomes. It is about changing ways of thinking and being. It is not replacing one way of thinking with another; rather it is about bringing different knowledge systems, particularly those outside a Western system of thinking, into dialogue with each other. Through this interrelationship new knowledge is possible.

Central to making and sustaining pedagogical change is resisting the power of traditional views on schooling, and engaging in thinking, doing and being 'teacher' in different ways.

Interrelationship with Country has great potential for collective commitment to doing schooling differently.

Key take-aways

- Critical consciousness is becoming aware of how power works in educational systems and school practices to advantage some and disadvantage others.
- The impacts of colonial education systems on Aboriginal peoples are collective and systemic, so finding ways to address these should also be collective.
- Incorporating Indigenous viewpoints of interrelationship with Country is a way to challenge existing educational practices.

Further reading

Lowe, K., Skrebneva, I., Burgess, C., Harrison, N., & Vass, G. (2021). Towards an Australian model of culturally nourishing schooling. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 53(4), 467–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2020.1764111>

Yunkaporta, T., & Shillingsworth, D. (2020). Relationally responsive standpoint. *Journal of Indigenous Research*, 8(4). <https://doi.org/10.26077/ky71-qt27>