



Teaching First Nation Students:

Things to consider **and do**

Professor Rhonda Oliver

A photograph of a beach with waves crashing onto the shore under a clear blue sky. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, and the sand is a light brown. A small boat is visible in the distance on the horizon.

Acknowledge of Country

- I wish acknowledge to the traditional owners of the land on which I live and where I am presenting from today – the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation
- I pay my respect to their elders past, presenting and emerging

Overview

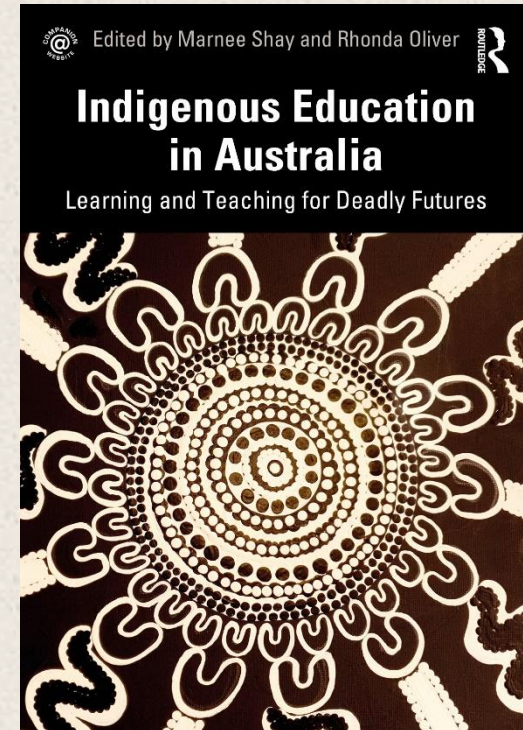
- In this presentation, informed by recent studies and collaboration with other researchers and educators, I'll describe some of the key issues that need to be considered when teaching First Nation Australian students. This includes a consideration of their diverse language backgrounds, the impact of cultural issues on learning, and the importance of family. Suggestions for different approaches and strategies will be outlined.



“Who’s your mob and where are you from?”



- I was born in Perth and my father’s side have been Australian since the time of colonisation (1788)
- I was trained as a primary school teacher, but mostly worked as an ESL teacher with newly arrived migrant and refugee children
- I became a University lecturer in the 1990s after completing my Masters and then PhD
- My research has focused on children learning a second language, including Australian Aboriginal students learning Standard Australia English as a second/third/fourth language/dialect
- My story also includes my accidental journey into Indigenous Education



Aboriginal people in Australia: A very brief background

- Aboriginal people in Australia (& especially within my state of Western Australia) are diverse – in their language and culture, their history, where they live, and their employment status and opportunities...
- but culturally they share a strong connection to land (boodja) – their country, the importance of family, how they like to learn (i.e., by seeing and doing) and how they share information and communicate (i.e., through yarning)
- Noongar Elder Uncle/Professor Simon Forrest describes how Aboriginal people have been in Australia for at least 60,000 years – ‘the first of the first nations’ (e.g., Bidyadanga footprints)
- In Western Australia > 60 language groups, but their language use varies considerably (traditional, Kriol, Aboriginal English, SAE)
- Like many first nations peoples they have been dispossessed and continue to experience disadvantage – often a direct consequence of colonisation
- For work, family and cultural reasons they will travel considerable distances and this has impacted their language



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First nation students at school

- Face discrimination and marginalisation (Anderson et al., 2016),
- Experience lower levels of achievement than other children and they are less likely to complete high school
- Completion rate is 55% compared to 76%
- In places with high FN enrolment (ie remote) even lower in NT 3.1% and WA 1.9%
- Have limited access to upper secondary school (less than half in areas with 80% or more FN students)
- Have low attendance rates but high levels of student disengagement and dropout



Reasons (for levels of attendance and engagement)

FN students:

- Can have low self-attributions about their ability to succeed at school
- Negative self-concept and low levels of self-efficacy (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2012)
- Low levels of wellbeing (Tomyn et al., 2015)
- Experience cultural mismatch (Lowe, Moodie et al., 2021)
- Racism (Moodie, 2023)



Connection between language and learning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may speak a traditional language, a contact language (e.g., Kimberley Kriol) a dialect AAE and/or SAE:

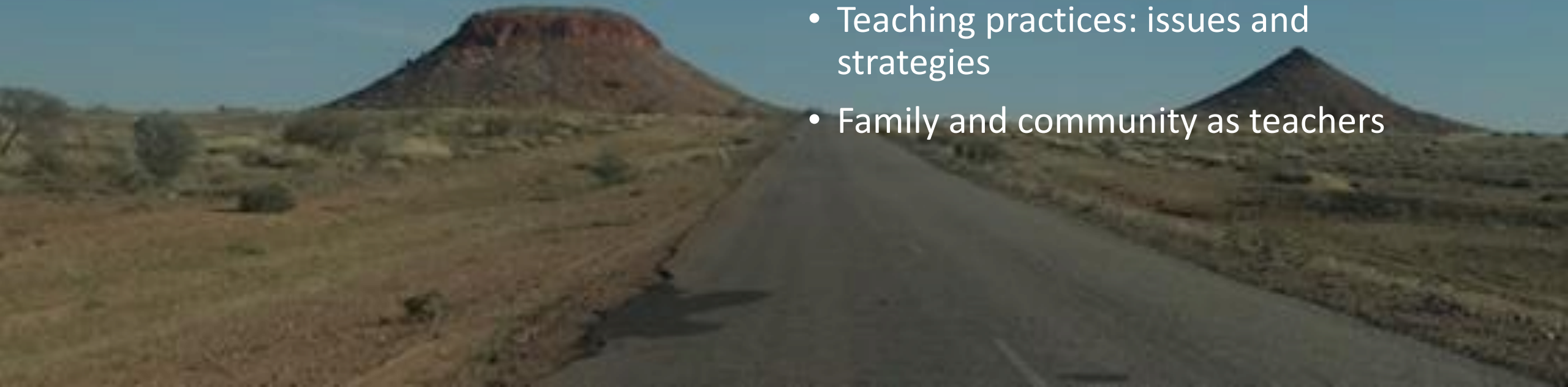
- Often do not have the opportunity to use their full linguistic repertoire in class, yet these language(s) serve to scaffold their learning

This results in lower access to the content and understandings taught in class



Suggestions

- Translanguaging as a scaffold
- Country informed pedagogy
- Culturally safe schools and pedagogy
- Teaching practices: issues and strategies
- Family and community as teachers



What is translanguageing?

- Translanguageing is the practice of multilingual speakers moving easily back and forth across their entire linguistic repertoire to engage in interactive meaning-making processes
- Previously called codeswitching which implies a shifting or shuttling backwards and forwards between speakers' different codes, often with the implication that the minority language speaker should switch to the majority language
- Translanguageing better represent the fluidity of what has been documented to occur amongst First Nation speakers – what Ober (2022) describes as “slipping and sliding”
- It is an everyday practice many of our First Nation people





Translanguaging as a scaffold

- Supports learning and language learning
- Reflects the ideological foundation of ‘two-way’ or ‘both ways’ learning (described later)
- Helps meaning making to become a shared responsibility which is fundamental to best practice within the classroom
- Extensive research has found FN students “adjusted their language choices according to the audience and content of their discussions”.

Country informed pedagogy

- For example, 'On Country' learning involves taking students either via excursions or virtually on to their traditional lands where they connect with their environment, culture, language and community practices)
- Reflects the deep, inherent connection to and relationship with land (e.g., go out bush)
- Integrates cultural, environmental, and spiritual knowledge, providing comprehensive and meaningful educational experiences (Burgess et al., 2022)
- Uses Country as a 'classroom'
- Leads to greater student engagement with learning
- Serves to strengthen traditional knowledge, understandings and cultural identity—a place for healing and improved wellbeing (Knight et al., 2024).
- Leads to greater enjoyment in schooling



Culturally safe schools and pedagogy



- Are places where students want to because they feel comfortable, supported and not 'shamed'
- Are not places where they experience racism
- Have high expectations (vs gatekeeping)
- Reflect local First Nations values, knowledge and teaching methods (e.g., seasonal curriculum calendar, yarning circles)
- Makes schools enjoyable and not boring (e.g., VET courses)
- Respect cultural priorities, and are neither tokenistic nor involve cultural taxation
- Understand agency and autonomy (e.g., task-based and negotiated curriculum)
- Do not rely on behavioural management of "punishment" and "growling"
- Do need more local, First Nation teachers

Teaching practices

There is a need to:

- Have more FN teachers and local educators within our schools,
- Build relationships – with students, families and community (be visible!)
- Develop awareness of local language(s) and culture
- Be respectful and consultative and collaborative (i.e., work together as a team to find ways forward)
- Take a strength-based approach building on attributes and ways of learning, instead of perpetuating deficit narratives
- Target student needs and interests
- Incorporate students first languages/dialects (e.g., through translanguaging practices)
- Use two-way or both-ways learning (see over)
- For On Country learning





Both-ways learning

- Brings together knowledges and understandings at the “Cultural Interface” (i.e., drawing on both Aboriginal and western academic knowledge systems)
- Embraces students’ language(s) and cultural in informed, but not in tokenistic ways
- Recognises and acknowledges the cultural knowledge, skills and conceptual understandings that FN students bring to school
- Draws on students’ cultural strengths and identity to engage with new academic concepts, curriculum content and skills

Family and community as teachers and educators

- Can bring cultural knowledge and perspectives into the classroom making the learning experience more relevant and meaningful, increasing engagement and attendance
- If they are welcomed and comfortable, their children will have a better attitude towards school (i.e., works to counter family perceptions) – but this requires the development of strong relationships
- *“We want to keep our elders involved. It’s a community school. Come in and just do activities. That’s how we learnt in the past, by learning from Elders.”*
- Provide positive role models
- Are a resource for language and cultural knowledge
- Should have a role in school governance (e.g., on the school board, school elders)



A wide-angle photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, there is a sandy beach with some sparse, low-lying vegetation. The middle ground shows the ocean with gentle waves lapping at the shore. The sky is filled with large, dramatic, grey and white clouds, suggesting an overcast or stormy day. The horizon line is visible in the distance.

Final thoughts

- Time to work towards locally based solutions
- “Need to put on our listening ears”
- We should “no longer be silencing, but instead honouring and amplifying Indigenous voices”
- As non-Aboriginal people our support comes from being informed allies - even accomplices
- There is great promise, but still a long way to go....and if we do nothing, nothing changes

A serene sunset scene with a calm body of water reflecting the sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, glowing path of light across the water. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and blue.

Thank you

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