

# CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLING IN AUSTRALIA

A review of the literature



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2025**

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This research was supported fully by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects funding scheme (Project ID: DP220100651 *Culturally Responsive Schooling*). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.

Suggested citation:

Diplock, A., Rigney, L.-I., Hattam, R., Zembylas, M., Schulz, S., Memon, N., Kelly, S. & King, M. (2025). *Culturally responsive schooling in Australia: A review of the literature*. University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.

ISBN: 978-1-7641566-0-8 (online)

ISBN: 978-1-7641566-1-5 (print)

*Cover design:* Version Design+Brand+Digital, Norwood, South Australia.

### **Acknowledgement of Country**

Ngai Kaurna miyurna tampinhi. Parna yarta mathanya puki-unangku

We acknowledge the Kaurna people as the custodians of the region now commonly known as Adelaide, where the authors of this review all currently live and work. We would also like to acknowledge the Narungga, Ngarrindjeri and Peramangk peoples, as some of this research took place on their Country, and to all Aboriginal peoples across so-called Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, as the first educators here. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and that the ethical, material and affective implications of invasion continue to impact all of us in Australia today.

*The terms Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, First Nations and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout this manuscript. We also reference different Aboriginal language groups where necessary. We deeply acknowledge and respect the great diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

## **Dedication**

In memory of our dear friends and colleagues Professor Luis Moll and Professor Lew Zipin whose research helped teachers connect learners to their funds of knowledge, and to recognise the learners in themselves.

## Preface

This review of literature has been written with teachers, school leaders and teacher educators as the prime audience. The purpose of mapping the theoretical territory towards an Australian version of culturally responsive schooling is to address the question: *How can school leadership and their structures support teachers to enact culturally responsive teaching using whole-of-school approaches?*

This review forms part of a larger project led by Chief Investigator Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney titled *Culturally Responsive Schooling*.<sup>1</sup> This project was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery grant with the aim to investigate how schools become culturally responsive. Specifically, we explored what constitutes a culturally responsive school in Australia and how the affective environments of schools attend to the diverse cultural, academic and emotional needs of their communities.

This study drew on previous work in the field. The study of culturally responsive pedagogies (CRP) in Australia derived from a 2017–19 ARC Discovery grant led by University of South Australia (UniSA) Professors Lester-Irabinna Rigney and Robert Hattam, the first of its kind in Australia. The project, *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*,<sup>2</sup> investigated teachers engaged in researching their own practice with the aim of enacting culturally responsive teaching in Aboriginal and diverse classrooms. A central finding was that teachers were adopting CRP principles to move beyond deficit views of learners and create learning environments that link children's lifeworlds to the curriculum for more equitable educational experiences.

This work was also informed methodologically by an earlier 2003–06 ARC-funded project led by Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney titled *Indigenous Research Methodologies: Frameworks Toward Indigenous Intellectual Sovereignty and the Decolonisation of Research* [Project ID: DI0348109]. It was also informed by some of Robert Hattam's research. Specifically, this project drew on a range of insights that emerged in various ARC-funded studies including the following:

- Young people stay at school if they feel that school is contributing to their identity work or their version of *becoming somebody* (*Students Completing Schooling* project).
- Enabling conditions for improving teaching and learning in so-called disadvantaged schools are *educational leadership*, understood here as leading curriculum and

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<sup>1</sup> *Culturally Responsive Schooling*, ARC Discovery Project 2022–24, \$367,000, L.-I. Rigney, R. Hattam, S. Kelly, M. Zembylas, S. Schulz and N. Memon.

<sup>2</sup> *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, ARC Discovery Indigenous Project 2017–19, \$337,000, L.-I. Rigney and R. Hattam.

pedagogical change; *re-culturing* from a deficit to an asset school culture; and enactment of *action research* for professional learning (*Teachers' Learning* project).

- The *Redesigning Pedagogy in the North* (RPiN) project was designed as an augmented whole-of-year action research project and worked with teachers using these three provocations for middle years pedagogy: high intellectual challenge; strongly connecting to the lifeworlds of students; and providing an audience for student learning in concert with using multimodal approaches. Augmented action research juxtaposed action research with ethnography and policy studies.
- The school is *the* key site for school reform and 'educational leadership', understood here as curriculum and pedagogical leadership, is a key enabling condition (*Educational Leadership and Turnaround Literacy Pedagogies* project).
- Reconciliation in Australia can be understood as a form of cultural politics and hence can be characterised as political and pedagogical. As a minimum, reconciliation pedagogy involves decolonising praxis; dialogue and listening; counter-memory; the utopian imaginary; and the relationship between personal and social transformation (*Reconciliation Pedagogy* project).

Details of these projects can be found in Appendix A.

The *Culturally Responsive Schooling* study took place at a time of increasing requests for neoliberal education standardisation and high-stakes testing domestically. During the study, Australia overwhelmingly rejected a plan to give greater political rights to Aboriginal First Nations people in a referendum.<sup>3</sup> The failed vote has serious implications for Australian schools, including potentially a re-evaluation of how First Nations children and perspectives are taught. While the referendum focused on constitutional change, the ongoing need for representation, truth telling and agreement making with First Nations peoples remains, and will require school to play an increasing and important role.

The study also navigated deeply troubling times internationally with war in Ukraine and Gaza, Trumpism, emboldening of white supremacy, rising economic inequality, technological capitalism and climate change. These forces contribute to undermining democratic values and creating political instability, which all impact the functioning of schools and their workforces.

This literature review and its analyses raise questions about school leadership, structures and systems, and teachers' pedagogical approaches in linking curriculum to the lifeworlds and aspirations of diverse students. The review is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather

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<sup>3</sup> In October 2023, Australians voted in a referendum on whether to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution through an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. The proposal was rejected nationally, with around 60% voting 'No' and seven out of eight states and territories voting against the change.



offers an overview of the varied approaches that shape culturally responsive pedagogies across local, national and international contexts especially in the Pacific.

## About the authors

We, the authors of this review, are Abigail Diplock, Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Robert Hattam, Michalinos Zembylas, Samantha Schulz, Nadeem Memon, Stephen Kelly and Mikayla King. Our collective experiences are in the field of teacher education, having previously worked as teachers in multiple schools in various countries. The majority of the authors continue to live and work on unceded Kaurna Country (University of South Australia, University of Adelaide and Adelaide University). Our work, while based in Australia, has a national and global geographic focus in collaboration with Dr Michalinos Zembylas, Professor of Educational Theory and Curriculum Studies at the Open University of Cyprus and honorary Professor at Nelson Mandela University in the Chair for Critical Studies in Higher Education. Our collective research experience in leading large-scale research projects includes projects on Aboriginal education, Indigenist epistemologies, peace education, human rights education and citizenship education, all of which are vital to this project.

In what follows, we turn to reflect on our own locations in relation to this research, acknowledging that who we are shapes what and how we come to know. The articulation of one's positionality has become a near-obligatory gesture in contemporary research practice, particularly in Indigenous and decolonial scholarship, where it signals an awareness that knowledge is always located, partial and entangled in histories of power. Such statements can open space for transparency, accountability and dialogue by situating the researcher in relation to the people, places and knowledges with whom they work. Yet, as critical scholars have observed, the practice carries its own problematics. When reduced to a brief litany of identity markers, positionality can harden fluid and intersectional life histories into fixed categories, reinscribing the very colonial and racial binaries it seeks to unsettle (Assoulin & Bacaller, 2024). It can also function performatively as a kind of ethical credential or guilt redemption rather than as an ongoing mode of reflexive engagement. Attending to positionality, then, requires holding both its necessity and its limits in view, acknowledging where and how we are situated, while remaining attentive to the shifting, contested and sometimes contradictory nature of those locations. As Zembylas (2025) suggests, moving beyond static self-disclosure requires reframing positionality as a 'forward-looking, action-driven' (p. 467) practice that not only names our complicity in enduring colonial hierarchies but also commits us to collaborative, solidaristic work aimed at dismantling them. In this project, we worked as a diverse team of scholars conscious of our heterogeneous and intersecting privileges, recognising how these shaped our perspectives in different contexts, and drawing on this awareness to engage collaboratively and critically in the development of this literature review. In the spirit of this reflexive and critical stance, we now share our own positionality statements, recognising them as provisional accounts rather than definitive declarations.

**Abigail Diplock** (she/her) is a settler-colonial Australian of English/Irish heritage. She grew up in Oxford, England and worked as a primary school teacher in England, Portugal and Uganda before moving to unceded Kaurna and Peramangk Country in 2001, continuing to work

as a primary school teacher for a few years. Having completed her PhD as part of the project *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* and having worked as the research assistant for the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* study, she is currently working as a postdoctoral research fellow for the *Culturally Nourishing Schooling* project, led by Professor Kevin Lowe. Growing up in the very heart of the British Empire's intellectual bastion, she recognises how her worldview has been shaped by epistemic hierarchies that frame Western knowledge as superior, and how this complicity requires her to work intentionally to unsettle these frames. This means she commits her teaching and research to working collaboratively in community contexts, pursuing anti-colonial praxes that value the complexity of everyday practices and their entanglement with diverse knowledges and ways of knowing.

**Lester-Irabinna Rigney** is an esteemed Professor of Education at the University of South Australia. He is widely recognised as the founder of Australian culturally responsive pedagogies. Informed by his early work on Indigenist epistemologies, the theory of culturally responsive pedagogies developed in 2018 was the first of its kind in Australia derived from an ARC Discovery Grant (Project ID: IN170100017). As a catalyst to improve Indigenous lives, this work investigated teachers as researchers of their own practice with the aim to enact culturally responsive teaching practices in Aboriginal and diverse classrooms. A central finding was that the teachers adopted CRP principles to move beyond deficit views of learners and create learning environments that link Aboriginal children's lifeworlds to curriculum for more equitable educational experiences. In 2021 Professor Rigney was appointed a member of the Order of Australia in the General Division (AM) for outstanding service to Indigenous education and to social inclusion research. He is a descendent of the Narungga Nation from Yorke Peninsula, South Australia and has written several sovereignty rights documents for the Narungga Nation including: the Narungga Declaration (1996), Buthera Agreement (2018), and Narungga Native Title (2023). Professor Rigney is a Distinguished Fellow at Deakin University and previous Distinguished Fellow at Kings College, London. He has a long and distinguished record of researching with public schools for systemic, policy and pedagogical reform towards equality, social justice and democratic inclusion. He was Co-chair of the Pedagogies for Justice Research Group and a member of the Education Unit of the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion at UniSA. He is a member of the Centro Loris Malaguzzi Scientific Committee for the Foundation Reggio Children. One of Australia's most respected Aboriginal educationalists, he is well published and has led several research teams funded by the Australian Research Council and other competitive grants including *Indigenist Research Epistemologies*; *Addressing the Gap between Policy and Implementation: Strategies for Improving Educational Outcomes of Indigenous Students*; *Towards an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*; and *Culturally Responsive Schooling*.

**Robert Hattam** is Emeritus Professor in the School of Education, UniSA, and was leader of the Pedagogies for Justice research group. His research focuses on teachers' work, educational leadership, critical and reconciliation pedagogies, refugees, and school reform. He has been involved in several Australian Research Council-funded projects including *Rethinking*

*Reconciliation and Pedagogy in Unsettling Times; Redesigning Pedagogies in the North; Schooling, Globalisation and Refugees in Queensland; Negotiating a Space in the Nation: The Case of Ngarrindjeri; Educational Leadership and Turnaround Literacy Pedagogies; Towards an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; and Culturally Responsive Schooling.*

**Michalinos Zembylas** is a white male scholar from Cyprus, a postcolonial country profoundly shaped by the legacies of British colonisation, enduring forms of coloniality and persistent ethno-nationalism. Recognising the ambivalence of his positionality – benefiting from the privileges of whiteness while actively critiquing the structures that sustain it – he draws on affect theory to investigate how whiteness and coloniality operate as powerful affective regimes, reproduced and normalised through everyday emotions in both society and education. His research spans contexts including South Africa, Australia and Cyprus, engaging critically with decolonisation, social justice and political responsibility. Central to his work is exploring how to cultivate affective communities that resist exclusion, disrupt entrenched hierarchies and foster more just, inclusive educational futures.

**Samantha Schulz** (she/her) is a first-generation settler Australian of Anglo heritage and sociologist of education at The University of Adelaide. Sam grew up on unceded Kaurna land. She completed a Bachelor of Arts majoring in sociology in 1996 before engaging in development work in rural Kenya and eventually returning to Australia to complete two subsequent degrees. One was a Master of Teaching with First Class Honours which paved the way for a teaching role in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, where Sam would later locate her doctoral studies. Through this project, Sam developed an analytics of white governmentality to explore ‘race’ and schooling in white Australia, with a specific focus on remote Aboriginal schooling and questions of racial justice. Sam was a lead CI on the ARC Discovery Project *Culturally Responsive Schooling* and has also led major consultancies on Aboriginal education, including producing Catholic Education South Australia’s 10-year Aboriginal Education Strategy (2025–35), and is now part of the tri-state *Culturally Nourishing Schooling* project. Sam’s work is chiefly characterised by the knowledge that, while formal education can be a vehicle for social good, its politicisation means that schools are largely failing to counter phenomena such as racism and sexism. Sam is driven to use the privileges of her whiteness to expose and counter how infrastructure, including schools and universities, are not simply physical spaces but systems that influence how people feel, interact and produce knowledge, and she is dedicated to helping teachers to productively resist and transform inequality at the micro level while working structurally to influence policy.

**Nadeem Memon** is a Canadian Muslim of Pakistani heritage. He was born and raised in Toronto, Canada and worked as a secondary school English and history teacher before completing graduate studies. Nadeem completed his MA and PhD in education at the University of Toronto in 2006 and 2009 respectively. His research program is two-pronged: firstly, he explores conceptions of education in the Islamic tradition and their implications for faithful praxis in contemporary Islamic schools. Secondly, in the public system his research explores religiously responsive pedagogies for learners who identify with a marginalised

religion. Nadeem moved to unceded Kurna Country in 2018 to join the Centre for Islamic Thought and Education in Education Futures at UniSA.

**Stephen Kelly** has recently retired and holds the title of adjunct at The University of Adelaide. Dr Kelly was born in the highlands of New Guinea, living with local indigenous people for the first five years of his life. He was born to parents with Irish, Anglo and Swedish heritage. Dr Kelly's research is influenced by post-structuralist and post-humanist approaches to education, and he has drawn on Foucault studies to pursue interests in the politics, policies, history and philosophy of education and the connection of these domains of thought to contemporary educational practice. He is interested in applying these sociological and philosophical approaches to research curriculum and its connection to the ontologies of diverse cultures, the subjectivities of educators and children, the work of leaders in cultivating school cultures, and arts and literacy education.

**Mikayla King** was raised as the oldest daughter to a Kalkutungu man and Dutch woman on Whadjuk Boodja. She belongs to the Saltmere, Patterson, Van Der Bol and Van Nue Burg families, who have all experienced the White Australia Policy, and the silencing and erasure of knowledges, languages and experiences through schooling and beyond. Mikayla has spent the last 14 years working in hard-to-staff public schools in various teaching and non-teaching roles. This has significantly influenced her research interests, interpretations, commitments and engagement in the research/knowledge production sphere. Mikayla's consideration of this orients her research and teaching towards ensuring there is alignment with the self and collective determinations of her people, working within communities she is connected to, engaging responsibility with reciprocity at the heart of all of her work and seeking to courageously and rigorously contribute to the existing knowledge loom.



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## Introduction

This introduction provides an overview of the context and purpose of the literature review. It begins by outlining the broad contours of the two ARC-funded projects from which this review emerges. The subsequent sections describe the methodology we used for reviewing the literature, and then describe how the review is organised. The introduction concludes with some background to Australia's colonial context and policy landscape, situating the discussion of culturally responsive schooling within these broader social and historical conditions.

### **Sustaining culturally responsive teaching: From classroom to school**

This review of literature specifically maps educational research that is pertinent for those interested in advancing an Australian version of a culturally responsive school. To reiterate our explanation in the preface, this review was conducted as part of the study *Culturally Responsive Schooling* (CRS), which aimed to investigate how schools become culturally responsive. Specifically, we explored what constitutes a culturally responsive school in Australia and how the affective environments of schools attend to the diverse cultural, academic and emotional needs of their communities. The CRS study evolved from a previous study: *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*. This opening section will briefly outline how the *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* study provided a rationale for the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project.

### ***Working on culturally responsive pedagogy***

The *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* study was framed as our response to the appalling learning outcomes of Indigenous students in Australia by any measure, and we argued this was an urgent international problem. The scale and historical context of the achievement gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students have been a focus since the first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy in 1989 (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989). Despite this policy work, all of the recent Australian prime ministers have reported the failure of the federal government's Closing the Gap strategy to address the disparity in Aboriginal schooling achievement (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2024). As well, in Australia in the past decade or so there have been many schooling initiatives including *Dare to Lead* (Principals Australia Institute, 2014), *What Works* (Price & Hughes, 2009), *Stronger Smarter* (Stronger Smarter Institute, 2024) and the Cape York Institute (Cape York Partnership, 2025), all with varied and uneven effects (Buckskin et al., 2009; Craven & Price, 2009; Guenther & Osborne, 2020, 2021; Price & Hughes, 2009). Research into the experiences of Indigenous students has too often focused on the problems, barriers and challenges teachers face and the need to improve teacher quality and pre-service teacher education (Craven et al., 2014; Moodie et al., 2021; Price, 2015; D. Rigney et al., 1998; L.-I. Rigney, 2011; Vass et al., 2019). Yet globally there is a growing body of

evidence that culturally responsive pedagogies do improve academic success for First Nations peoples in settler-colonial countries such as the USA, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998; R. Bishop et al., 2007; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017a; G. H. Smith, 2003).

In Australia, at the time when the ARC grant application was being drafted in 2016, little to no attention had been given to culturally responsive pedagogies in Australian public school classrooms. The theory and practice of culturally responsive pedagogies in Australia was only weakly developed, had no significant peer-evaluated reviews (e.g., Krakouer, 2015; Perso, 2012), had only a few productive advocates (e.g., Nakata, 2011; Rahman, 2013; Sarra, 2011; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009), and had yet to inform the curriculum and pedagogical reform projects of state and federal jurisdictions. There was no substantial theoretically informed and empirically substantiated Australian version of culturally responsive pedagogy available to Australian educators working in schools, or those preparing new teachers.

Once it was underway, *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* was the first study of its kind in Australia. It was led by Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney. The project encountered the Indigenous and superdiverse learners that are the new normal in most of the classrooms in the schools we were working with. All of our participating teachers reported working in classrooms with students whose families came from least 15 different nations. Australian classrooms are now defined by increasing cultural diversity of students, with public schools serving very culturally diverse communities, and Indigenous students are part and parcel of that cultural diversity. When reflecting on Australian cultural diversity, Noble (2011) rightly argues that too much theory, policy and practice in this area misunderstands the nature of cultural diversity:

Cultural complexity is much more than the sum of nationally defined ‘cultures’, and it goes well beyond an awareness of the degree of differentiation within and across those nationally defined cultures; it must also be seen in the multiple forms of adaption and mixing that mark the process of settlement, intermarriage, intergenerational change and the plural social contexts in which difference is negotiated. (p. 827)

Too often educational theory and policy assert outmoded stereotypes of ‘multiculturalism’ based on reified notions of culture rather than understanding cultures as always in translation, and hence hybridisation. Stereotyped multiculturalism assumes ‘an easy invocation of cultural harmony’ that itself ‘entails dangers’ (p. 838), and focuses too much on macro-policy analyses for problematisation. Such a position also pays too little attention to grounded studies that examine

the capacities humans employ in their daily lives to navigate the complexities of their world. We do not need more elaborate theorisation but ‘grounded analysis using middle-order conceptual tools to make sense of the ways people manage the complex milieu in which they move’. (p. 838)

Our brief analysis of the opportunities and challenges of cultural diversity for Australia into the future indicates that Australian ‘schools are currently sandwiched between demands of the economy on one side and increasingly fundamentalist communities on the other’ (Bates, 2012, p. 60). Importantly though, while schools are affected by these global pressures, they also provide spaces for hopeful interventions. Educational researchers could examine the effects of increasing cultural diversity on life in schools, but we prefer to focus instead on how schools teach *for* cultural diversity. While the focus here is on the Australian context, the findings and arguments presented resonate in other nations and, crucially, provoke important reflections about both educating for global citizenship and educating in globally diverse contexts.

The *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* project examined how teachers enact CRP in Australian mainstream middle school classrooms. Specifically, this entailed a multi-sited action research project in seven mainstream schools, augmented by analysis of policy texts and additional evidence about school structures and school cultures.

As a working definition, the project argued that CRP refers to pedagogies that value students’ cultural assets and requires teachers who are capable of engaging students from diverse backgrounds in rigorous learning. We codified CRP in terms of Rigney and Hattam’s five ideas as a constellation for characterising a culturally responsive pedagogical approach. These five provocations were a distillation of our own reading of international texts and their enactment of CRP (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1999; R. Bishop et al., 2007; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b, Sleeter, 2011a; Villegas & Lucas, 2002a, 2002b). Rigney and Hattam’s five ideas were presented as the key practices of a CRP:

- Provide high intellectual challenge.
- Recognise cultural difference as an asset for learning.
- Connect strongly to students’ lifeworlds.
- Support the performing of learning to an audience and use multimodal literacies.
- Enable an activist orientation (see the ‘Culturally responsive pedagogies’ chapter; see also Hattam, 2023; Rigney, 2021).

The *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* project also adopted an augmented action research process to facilitate professional learning by the participating teachers. Our action research approach was facilitated by the research team and had been developed over around two decades of action research conducted by academics at UniSA (for more on action research see the ‘Critical action research’ chapter). The action research process involved a yearly cycle with four stages, roughly aligned to the four terms of the school year in South Australia, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Action research cycle

Term 1: Provocation	Project researchers clarify the broad aim(s) of the project. Participating educators share their existential classroom challenges and elucidate a hopeful idea/theory that could inform the redesign of their practice.
Term 2: Pedagogical redesign	Informed by the provocation phase, educators redesign their pedagogy/practice, plan their action research question, and determine the types of research data they will collect.
Term 3: Enacting the redesign	Educators enact their redesigned pedagogies and collect data.
Term 4: Reflecting and sharing	Educators prepare and deliver a public presentation addressing the question ‘What did I learn?’

The teachers who participated in the *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* project take part in two whole-year cycles and their case studies have been published on the project website (<https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au/>).

Our key findings can be summarised as follows:

1. We proved our concept, that is, when supported by a robust version of critical action research across a whole year, teachers can translate the provocations of CRP and transform their curriculum and teaching, with many benefits including improved learning outcomes and improved engagement in learning. We have also proved this concept in other research projects, including in the early years, primary schools, secondary schools and higher education settings.
2. Perhaps most importantly, the participating teachers transformed their understanding of what it means to teach, and how they understand their students. This transformation was understood in terms of moving from teaching through monologues (highly scripted ritual) to dialogic (improvisational) encounters; and through becoming more affectively available to the students. The transformation also involved shifting from deficit views of students to an assets view, or from assumptions about what students lack to trying to work with what students bring to class.
3. We learned how our participating teachers translated our constellation of five provocations into new classroom practices. These translations have been described on the project website and provide exemplars for subsequent action research (<https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au/>).

At the conclusion of this study, though, we became concerned about the sustainability of the transformed pedagogies of the participating teachers. What came into focus was the need to work with the notion that the school is *the* site for pedagogical transformation (Hayes et al.,

2017, p. 56), in which case a new research design was required, one that focused on becoming a culturally responsive school.

### ***Designing the Culturally Responsive Schooling project***

Against the failure of Australian education policy to recognise student superdiversity, the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* (CRS) project examined how schools become culturally responsive. Specifically, we explored what constitutes a culturally responsive school in Australia and how the affective environments of schools attend to the diverse cultural, academic and emotional needs of their communities. The project aimed to analyse how state and federal policy texts are interpreted and translated into local school practice; examine the work of school leaders within the context of school-wide culturally responsive reform; establish and sustain a collaborative action research community of educators and academic researchers across a cluster of four schools undergoing school-wide culturally responsive reform; and produce a website archive of case studies and advance theorisations of how schools and teachers become more culturally responsive.

Culturally responsive classroom pedagogies are insufficient if whole schools are to improve learning outcomes in superdiverse classrooms. Culturally responsive reforms at the school level have been enacted for Indigenous students in Hawaii (Kana'iaupuni et al., 2017), First Nations Canadian students (N. Bell, 2013), Māori students in Aotearoa New Zealand (R. Bishop, 2019), Sàmi students in Norway (Fyhn et al., 2016) and Native American students in the United States (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998, 1999). Such international research confirms that cultural responsiveness must be embedded across the whole school community. Schools as ecologies of practices need to address administrative, curriculum and pedagogical bias, teacher preparation, school culture and history, and community needs. Culturally responsive schools need to acknowledge students' resistance to structures and institutionalised practices which are hostile to their cultural identities. Experiences of discomfort, alienation and distrust that can arise from deficit views and the negation of minoritised students' cultural assets significantly affects their emotional investments in education (Fricker et al., 2023; King & Schulz, forthcoming; Weuffen, Maxwell et al., 2023).

Importantly also, as another point of departure from the *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* project, we now understand these conditions as an affective environment in which the combination of forces work upon one another to increase or decrease people's capacity to act. For example, the rippling effect of feelings of insecurity, precarity and inequality amongst poor and culturally diverse communities poses significant pedagogical challenges for whole schools. Research in the areas of equity and inclusion in schools also reports educator anxiety, paralysis (Weuffen, 2024; Weuffen, Lowe, Burgess, & Thompson, 2023), if not resistance, towards national education priorities of social inclusion (Gay, 2010). When members of a school community feel disconnected from positive representations of their culture, the work of building social cohesion through education is diminished. These educational conditions suggest that the affective domain is as important as cognitive academic

achievements: that members of schooling communities emotionally engage with cultural knowledge and practices, which in turn affects how they feel and learn (Zembylas, 2016, 2021). This points to the need to better understand the school as an ‘affective community’ (Zembylas, 2013), one that attends to emotional investments in cultural knowledge and practices as much as their rational representation.

As a working definition of culturally responsive schooling (CRS), we think of it as a process of significant, planned change using site-specific teacher-led research to improve or reposition innovative school strategic pedagogy for the success of Aboriginal and diverse students. Collaborative whole-school adaptive action by students, parents, teachers, leaders and principals is monitored and oriented towards pedagogical renewal that signals the direction of the school towards localised improvements away from ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches. It involves the school and its team refusing to accept that educational disparities are the students’ fault and that this is natural and inevitable, and instead employing an assets-based approach by recognising the intelligence and hard-won knowledges of teachers, students and communities.

The *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project was a three-year initiative involving four diverse schools, from early childhood to secondary. The project followed a scaling-up approach: in Year 1, two to five teachers from each school engaged in CRP action research; in Year 2 these teachers became teacher-leaders facilitating professional learning across their schools through either whole-staff engagement or cascading approaches integrated into existing professional development schedules, supported by university researchers through termly roundtables and workshops. In Year 3 schools took full ownership of the professional learning while the university team provided minimal ongoing support, with the goal of creating sustainable, school-wide transformation towards culturally responsive education practices. The three years of the project are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2:** The three years of the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project

Year 1	Two-to-five teacher-researchers from each school undertake the CRP action research. Teacher-researchers collaborate with school leadership to plan the move to the whole school in Year 2.
Year 2	Teacher-researchers from Year 1 (now ‘teacher-leaders’) lead CRP action research with colleagues (either small group or whole school).
Year 3	Continue the whole-school transformations, lightly supported by the university research team. Beyond Year 3 is past our research timeframe, although university researchers have been continuing to support schools.



Having provided some of the research context for the review, we now briefly outline how we approached the process of reviewing.

## **Methodology for reviewing the literature**

Any methodological approach to reviewing literature is tied up with axiology, ontology and epistemology (Tynan & Bishop, 2023), and these affect both the approach to reviewing the literature and the subsequent truths that are produced. According to Greenhalgh et al. (2018), who compare the truths produced through systematic and narrative reviews:

Different kinds of reviews offer different kinds of truth: the conventional systematic review with meta-analysis deals in probabilistic (typically, Bayesian) truth; it is concerned mainly with producing generalisable ‘facts’ to aid prediction. The narrative review, in contrast, deals in plausible truth. Its goal is an authoritative argument, based on informed wisdom. (p. 3)

For our review, we have aimed to produce an authoritative argument. It is not intended to be a complete audit of the literature at this point in time; rather it offers a critical overview of the field of scholarship around culturally responsive schooling, along with key fields of literature that contribute to this body of work. To this end, we have taken a critical narrative approach. Unlike systematic reviews that employ a structured methodological approach, a narrative literature review involves a more flexible and qualitative exploration of the literature, using a dynamic and engaged process. We took what Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) have described as a hermeneutic approach, which involved a non-linear iterative process of developing an understanding of the field through ‘literature searching, classifying and mapping, critical assessment, and argument development’ (p. 257).

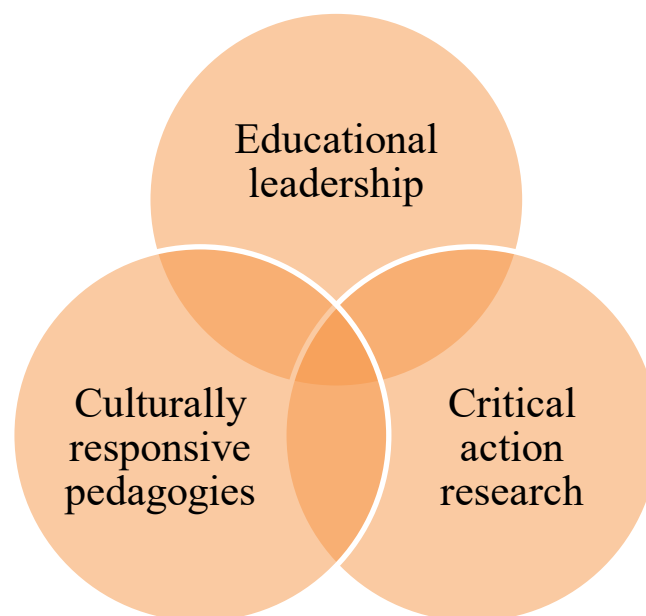
Our aim was to construct a coherent critical narrative by synthesising existing knowledge, and offering insights which foreground historical/political contexts, theoretical foundations, and emerging trends in the field of and around culturally responsive schooling. By adopting this approach, we were able to attend to ‘aspects of quality in research and scholarship ... such as intertextual connectivity, critique, interest, expertise, independence, tacit knowledge, chance encounters with new ideas, and dialogic interactions between researcher, “literature” and “data”’ (MacLure, 2005, p. 394). In this way, the review offers a theoretically informed critical intellectual analysis that incorporates the complexity and multiplicity of areas of inquiry that affect the way culturally responsive schooling has emerged, and continues to emerge, in the literature.

An important aspect of the critical review process is that it foregrounds the role of the researchers and their positionalities in the multiple decisions made in collating and synthesising the review, as well as the role of the researchers whose works are cited. Drawing on Indigenist methodologies (Rigney, 1997, 2001, 2006), this literature review is involved in resistance, is politically informed, and gives privilege to Indigenous and other voices that are often

subjugated (Rigney, 2006). In collating the literature, we were conscious of the ubiquitous whiteness of citational praxis (Ahmed, 2017) and ‘the European academy’s continued, collective reticence to address its own racist and colonial roots, and debt to Indigenous thinkers in a meaningful and structural way’ (Todd, 2016, p. 10). We therefore aimed to foreground the knowledges of thinkers whose scholarship, theorisations, lived experiences and knowledges are systematically overlooked, while still drawing heavily on relevant, high-quality research from all authors who take a strongly critical approach. Importantly, we acknowledge our integral role in selecting, interpreting and evaluating the publications, and in constructing the arguments that follow.

### Structure of the literature review

In the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* study our aim was to investigate the culturally responsive school in Australia, and specifically to examine how schools are going about becoming more culturally responsive. As such we draw on the following three sub-fields to review significant literature for understanding a culturally responsive school: culturally responsive pedagogies, critical action research and educational leadership, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** The three bodies of literature reviewed

It is our contention that pedagogy is the key site for educational transformation. As Boomer stated decades ago, ‘Unless we solve the pedagogy problem, all other efforts at reconstruction, including efforts to reconstruct the Australian workforce, will be in vain’ (1999, p. 136). This review therefore begins with a brief overview of CRP, and in particular how we have

conceptualised it through five key ideas for practice, referring also to our more extensive literature review already published (A. Morrison et al., 2019). To support teachers to become culturally responsive requires modalities of professional learning that enable them to learn in relationship with their students, colleagues and communities, and to respond to the specific cultural, linguistic and social contexts of their classrooms – a concern taken up in the following chapter’s focus on critical action research as the mode through which such learning can be cultivated. From here, the review turns to educational leadership, recognising that the conditions enabling this learning are ultimately shaped by how leaders steer school cultures, priorities and practice. Leadership is the central mechanism through which schools shape their cultures, mobilise professional learning and sustain pedagogical transformation; accordingly, the review devotes its longest chapter to an extended analysis of leadership as the key driver of culturally responsive schooling. Briefly, we advocate for critical leadership studies specifically. We see culturally responsive school leadership as having the task of not only managing the administrative and physical space, but enabling the development and transformation of pedagogical approaches that are responsive to the school’s locale and to the distinctive characteristics of all students.

We contend that schools are dynamic affective environments, where interconnected elements (material and discursive) collectively shape students’, teachers’ and the community’s potential for engagement or withdrawal. We also recognise schooling to be constituted within neoliberalised policy and managerialised discursive/affective terrains, and within racialised, gendered and embodied socio/political space.

Before we provide our review of these three themes, we will provide some context. Firstly, we provide a brief reading of Australia’s colonial history as pertinent for education, and second a brief account of the policy context for culturally responsive schooling.

## **Australia’s colonial context**

### ***Education in the settler-colonial state of Australia***

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been living and thriving on/with the land that we now call Australia, through complex governance systems of health and welfare, science and law, art and philosophy. All of these depended on sophisticated education systems (Price, 2015; Rigney, 2001, 2002; Rudolph & Fricker, 2025; Yunkaporta, 2019), through which ‘Indigenous children have long been successful’ (Rigney, 2002, p. 75).

Throughout this vast history, there has been significant cultural and linguistic diversity, with more than 250 languages spoken prior to colonisation (National Archives of Australia, n.d.), and international relations (e.g., between Yolŋu and Macassans) adding to the cultural multiplicity. This diversity has continued to increase since the beginnings of invasion, which

has brought successive waves of new arrivals. In recent years the plurality of peoples in Australia has continued to expand so that now ‘Australia is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries in the world’ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025), with 3 out of 10 people having been born overseas, and 1 in 4 speaking a language other than English at home. This rich cultural diversity is reflected in classrooms, where students bring a myriad of distinct knowledges, languages and practices.

However, these rich learning resources are too often left unrecognised and un(der)utilised in a schooling system dominated by white settler curriculum and pedagogy (Lowe, Golledge et al., 2025; Vass, 2014, 2016; Weuffen et al., 2024). Education in settler colonial countries such as Australia was ‘established to serve an imperial agenda; upholding colonial values and social norms’ (M. Bishop et al., 2019, p. 196; see also King & Schulz, forthcoming; Rigney 2021, 2023c), with schooling functioning as a key site of colonisation which continues to the present day (Beresford, 2012; Lowe, Moodie et al., 2021). As a consequence, not only are such students being disadvantaged educationally and subjected to implicit assimilationist agendas on a daily basis, but schools and the wider community are missing out on the knowledges that this diversity offers (Arnott et al., 2025).

More generally, Australian school reform policy is in crisis on two counts: students’ achievement is going backwards on international comparisons and our system is one of the most unequal in the OECD (Bruckauf & Chzhen, 2016, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2018), with ‘Australian schools being among the most socially segregated within the OECD’ (Sciffer, 2025, p. 661). This policy crisis is especially evident for Aboriginal children and their communities, with a recent Closing the Gap report (Productivity Commission, 2025) showing that only 4 out of 19 socio-economic targets are on track to be met, while 4 are worsening. Australian educational policy has failed for decades to ameliorate educational disadvantage (Comber, 2016) affecting both Indigenous and culturally diverse, high-poverty communities. This policy and practice challenge was brought into plain view at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with the public illumination of the inequalities of school funding, the highly differentiated and unequal experience of schooling at home, and the digital divide. The failed 2023 referendum for an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament in Australia (Fricker, 2024), the unfolding horrors in Palestine, which Australia and many ‘fellow’ settler-colonial countries actively support, as well as many other avoidable human-made humanitarian crises around the world also demonstrate the need for urgent educational responses to the systemic neglect of cultural diversity, racial literacy and racial justice.

The unfolding complexity of these conditions points to the need to better understand how schools, and the policies that influence their practice, can respond to Australia’s superdiverse society. It is our contention that this response needs to emphasise the importance of schooling as a vehicle for bringing students together while also embracing differences, recognising that knowledge production is as much a collective as individual undertaking. This pushes back against the dominant drive to individualise and psychologise difference from an imagined

normal as a problem to be catered for and solved (as reflected in the recent Teacher Education Expert Panel (2023) report).

These conditions all place pressure on education policy and school practices to embrace superdiversity in ways that advance social and educational benefits. While we recognise that the term superdiversity has its critics (Flores & Lewis, 2016), we use it in the way that Rigney (2023b) recently described:

Superdiversity does not simply mean more diversity or old versions of multiculturalism reified but rather represents a ‘new phenomenon that supersedes traditional conceptions of diversity’ (Li et al. 2021, p. 3). Benefits of diverse classrooms are well established and include empathy, understanding self through others, working well with different groups, gaining global perspectives, and engaging plurality of knowledges and multiliteracies. (pp. 3–4)

Australian schools are increasingly influenced by competition, standards and accountabilities, and these steering practices use ubiquitous measures to highlight disparities in achievement across economic and cultural groups. Such measures frequently fail to capture differences in cultural practices, excluding local needs and voices. This has the effect of suppressing the heterogenous interests of diverse people while emphasising common homogenous commitments to national values and goals.

### ***Historical policy analysis: Culturally responsive schooling in white Australia***

Australian schooling was never designed for First Nations peoples or culturally minoritised groups. Mass compulsory schooling modelled on English and Scottish curricula took root across the continent claimed as Australia between 1869 and 1882 (Miller, 1998). During this time, what little schooling was extended to the Indigenous child was based on the dominant cultural assumption that the Aboriginal ‘race’ was socially and biologically inferior (Tatz, 2013). Between 1901 and 1973, the White Australia Policy (WAP)<sup>4</sup> ensured that mainstream Australian schooling, like all aspects of the emergent nation, was largely culturally homogenous. Precipitated by a need to incorporate ‘less white’ people into the fledgling nation, the WAP nonetheless waned over time to be replaced by policies of assimilation, integration and eventually multiculturalism. These movements fuelled ostensibly benevolent efforts to include the Aboriginal child more comprehensively in schooling, albeit to offset Aboriginal culture (Partington, 2002, p. 3) – the purview of policy makers being to assist the Indigenous child to abandon her cultural heritage (Palmer, 1971). Multiculturalist discourses of the 1980s intersected with a growing and established push for First Nations rights and self-determination, which manifested, within schools, in celebrations of diversity and prescriptions for social change. But even critical orientations to Australian multiculturalism or First Nations educational sovereignty were problematically framed by the belief that ‘access to power and

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<sup>4</sup> A set of racist policies designed to restrict immigration to migrants of predominantly white British heritage.

self-determination comes *only* through acquiring the skills of mainstream culture’ (Kalantzis et al., 1985, p. 201, emphasis added). Within prevailing expressions of multiculturalism, white culture therefore remained naturally elevated in contrast to a variety of observable ‘ethnic’, ‘cultured’ and ‘Aboriginal’ Others (Larbalestier, 1999).

From the mid-1990s, critical and progressive educational endeavours in Australia were steadily subsumed by neoliberal imperatives to standardise education and minimise the educational gap (Rudolph, 2016), where gaps in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were dominantly conceptualised as the need to improve the Indigenous child. To this day, ‘gap rhetoric’ (Burgess & Lowe, 2022) informs Australia’s dominant policy and common-sense perceptions of the Aboriginal learner, as well as learners from culturally minoritised groups – learners who are constituted as requiring help to reach normative (white) educational standards. Neoliberal policy formations have also had broader impacts resulting in growing divisions between the nation’s most and least enfranchised students and schools. These divisions are exacerbated by accountability frameworks that establish whiteness as a norm against which diverse student cohorts are judged (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012), while testing instruments, such as the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), are standardised on the knowledge and skills of the urban-dwelling, wealthy, English-speaking mainstream. The burden to teach learners the white cultural capital required to do well on these tests puts pressure on teachers to ‘teach to the test’ (Connell, 2013), which is intensified when results are advertised on public league tables.

Australia’s major school league tabling system – the *My School* website – fuels competition between schools while circulating grossly oversimplified beliefs concerning what ‘good’ schooling or teaching constitutes. Learners are rewarded for performing whiteness (Vass, 2014), while the statistically poor outcomes of culturally diverse and economically marginalised learners become a focus of concern amongst policy makers rather than problematising the socio-historical structures that have created inequality in the first place. While teachers and schools across all sectors are expected to meet these top-down frameworks that naturalise whiteness, they are also mandated to cater equitably for cultural diversity, for example, as set out in the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2017) professional standards for teachers. The Australian Curriculum, which was implemented (in part) in 2011 by the federal government with the intent to ‘standardise, direct, and control what is taught in local schools across the country, replacing the previous system of state-based syllabus development and implementation’ (Burgess, Thorpe et al., 2022a, p. 160), has also now strengthened its commitments to First Nations peoples and cultures. For example, Version 9.0 aims to deepen ‘students’ understanding of First Nations Australian histories and cultures, the impact on – and perspectives of – First Nations Australians of the arrival of British settlers as well as their contribution to the building of modern Australia’ (ACARA, 2022).

Importantly, in the latest version, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority (CCP)

is composed of three interconnected aspects of Country/Place, Culture and People (ACARA, 2022). The stated intentions of the aspect of Country/Place include recognising connections to Country, positioning First Nations Australians as Traditional Owners and acknowledging the impact of colonisation. The Culture aspect includes examining First Nations cultural diversity, recognising First Nations cultures as the world's oldest and as continuous, and clarifying that Indigenous cultures are internationally enshrined. The People aspect includes acknowledging over 60,000 years of occupation, highlighting a diversity of First Nations peoples, and examining the sophisticated social systems, kinship structures, protocols and contributions of First Nations peoples. (Maher, 2022, p. 4)

These are welcome developments. However, it must be remembered that curriculum construction is a power-laden and political act (Apple, 2013). In many ways, the Australian Curriculum continues a selective tradition of establishing whose knowledge is important, how it should be learned and organised, and whether it is sufficiently important to be formally assessed. Ongoing criticisms include

the lack of clarity around what to embed, where to embed and how to embed the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] CCP (Anderson et al., 2022; Henderson, 2020) and a claim that [First Nations] content tends to be reduced and trivialised (Anderson et al., 2022; Parkinson & Jones, 2019). (Maher, 2022, p. 4)

The fact that the Australian Curriculum remains tethered to national performativity and accountability mechanisms that prioritise white knowledge, while Indigenous knowledges remain, in principle, optional (Salter & Maxwell, 2016), is a matter of overarching concern. This establishes a tension whereby teachers must prioritise white norms while embracing cultural diversity, which increases teachers' anxiety and, recently, exodus from the profession (Windle et al., 2022). Indeed, in 2024 Australia's federal education minister finally declared that Australia's teacher shortage constitutes a 'national crisis' (Campbell, 2024).

Australia is facing growing economic inequality, and under the core principles of neoliberalism – the prevailing political ideology of recent decades – its education system has become one of the most unequal among OECD countries. The government apparatus to lead change, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), promotes a narrow, prescriptive vision of culturally responsive pedagogies. In privileging quantitative cognitive science in a system driven by compliance and standardisation, qualitative research in which teacher-researchers use practitioner inquiry to improve practice success in diverse classrooms is dismissed. Knowledge brokers including the AERO, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, and state and territory education departments have been criticised for uneven adoption and unrealised benefits of culturally responsive pedagogies, leading to calls for strengthened implementation and consistent application (A. Morrison et al., 2019; Rigney, 2023a; Sawyer & Hattam, 2025).

In sum, the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project builds on the foundations of the *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* study to examine how culturally responsive

practice can be sustained across whole schools. This work demonstrates that meaningful and lasting change depends on leadership that applies to the whole of site – leadership that enables responsive structural reform to support and sustain collaborative practitioner inquiry and professional learning connected to the cultural and linguistic prior knowledge of students. Grounded in evidence-based research, the project positions pedagogy as the central site of reform and as the ethical and intellectual heart of the culturally responsive school. The next chapter turns to the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, outlining its theoretical lineage, key concepts and practices that inform this work (see A. Morrison et al., 2019, for a more complete review).



## **Culturally responsive pedagogies**

This chapter offers an overview of the literature on culturally responsive pedagogies, tracing its development and contemporary enactments in diverse educational contexts. It begins by offering a conceptualisation of what we mean by the term, followed by a brief history of the field, before outlining how culturally responsive pedagogies can be enacted in practice.

### **Conceptualising culturally responsive pedagogies**

The term ‘culturally responsive pedagogies’ (CRP) describes a range of practices that value students’ cultural assets as rich sources for education and engages students from diverse backgrounds in rigorous learning. CRP is a strengths-based, relational approach to education that positions teachers and students to learn with one another across cultures. Culturally responsive education has been shown to be successful in Australia and other colonised contexts globally, and benefits all learners, not only those from minority or Indigenous backgrounds (Ladson-Billings et al., 2024).

For the project *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, CRP was described using a set of five key principles that were drawn from the existing international archive (Hattam, 2018; A. Morrison et al., 2019; Rigney, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024; Rigney & Rinaldi, 2023). These principles drew on theory but were pragmatically oriented, to delineate the types of practices needed for implementing a culturally responsive teaching approach. Because of the success of this framing of CRP, the same key ideas were used in the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project too. We describe these more fully below, followed by some of the outcomes for teachers who have been involved in our projects. However, first we provide a brief history of CRP.

### **A brief history of culturally responsive pedagogies**

CRP is an educational approach that respects, utilises and builds on the knowledges and experiences that students and their communities bring to the educative space in order to support a healthy and thriving society. In this respect, First Nations peoples of Australia have been teaching in culturally responsive ways for tens of thousands of years, which has not only enabled survival across significant climatic changes, but has sustained sophisticated and complex systems of medicine, art, philosophy, law, lore, agriculture, community relationalities are care for Country across these millennia (Krakouer, 2015; Price, 2015; Rigney, 1997, 2001, 2021, 2024; Rudolph & Fricker, 2025; Yunkaporta, 2009, 2019).

In its current iteration, CRP is a form of critical pedagogy, and thus has its roots in the work of Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire. In line with Freire’s work, culturally responsive pedagogy recognises the cultural and political work of education and aims to build a more socially just

education system by drawing from the rich and diverse lifeworlds of students and their communities to disrupt knowledge hierarchies as well as support and develop individual and collective intellectual and critical capacities (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006b; Sleeter, 2012).

CRP itself is often attributed to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b) from the United States, who drew from critical race theory as well as previous research into pedagogy that was disrupting the systemic disadvantage experienced by African-American students<sup>5</sup> (see also Au & Jordan, 1981; Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Erickson, 1987; Villegas, 1991). Another foundational scholar, also from the US, Geneva Gay (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2006, 2010, 2015, 2018) offers a useful description of CRP: ‘culturally responsive pedagogy validates, facilitates, liberates, and empowers ethnically diverse students by simultaneously cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success’ (2018, p. 53).

Since the mid-1990s, CRP has rapidly expanded across all continents: North America (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017a, 2017b); South and Central America (Ortiz, 2009; Peña Sandoval, 2017; White et al., 2014); Africa (Anlimachie et al., 2025; Anohah & Suhonen, 2016; Babbitt et al., 2015; Biraimah, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017); Asia (Bui, 2014; Maasum et al., 2014; Zhang & Wang, 2016); Europe (Civitillo et al., 2019; Karatas & Oral, 2015; Nayir et al., 2017); as well as Oceania (as focused on in this literature review); with multiple terms being used to describe different iterations and lines of flight, from Ladson-Billings’ (1992, 1995a, 1995b) culturally *relevant* pedagogy to the more recently introduced term ‘culturally *nourishing* schooling’ (Lowe, Moodie et al., 2021; Lowe, Weuffen et al., 2025; <https://www.culturallynourishingschooling.org.au>). See A. Morrison et al. (2019, p. 13) for a list of terms. In Australia, initial reviews of the literature were published by Perso (2012) and Krakouer (2015) but, as A. Morrison et al. (2019) found in a later review, even as recently as 2019 there was only scant reference to CRP in Australia. Over the last five years since the publication of that review, however, there has been an explosion of literature around CRP both internationally and in Australia.

Key aspects of the CRP literature revolve around three purposes: 1. to enhance students’ educational success, 2. to support students’ cultural identities, and 3. to transform the assimilatory function of schooling.

1. Supporting the educational achievements of diverse students is vital for equitable participation (Buckskin, 2015; Burgess & Berwick, 2009; Hayes et al., 2006; Krakouer, 2015; Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Rigney, 2011, 2021, 2023a, 2023b), and therefore to enable these students to become competent and confident in their use of the dominant knowledges and skills (Delpit, 2006, 2012; Gay, 2021; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sarra, 2011; Sarra et al., 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> Ladson-Billings used the term ‘culturally relevant pedagogy’.

Importantly, though, this must not require students to choose between academic success and a strong cultural identity (Ma Rhea & Atkinson, 2008; Price, 2015; Rahman, 2013; Vass, 2018; Weuffen, Lowe, & Burgess, 2023), which leads to the following point.

2. Culturally responsive teachers recognise that students developing strong cultural identities and senses of belonging supports high academic achievements, and vice versa (Berryman & Eley, 2019; R. Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Dodson, 2003; Herbert, 2015; Hogarth, 2018, 2020; Kickett-Tucker, 2021; Lowe, Moodie et al., 2021; Moodie et al., 2021; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; 2006; Rahman, 2010; Rigney, 2001, 2021, 2023a, 2023b; Sarra, 2011; L. T. Smith, 2012). Cultural differences are seen as assets for learning (Alim & Paris, 2017; Borrero & Sanchez, 2017; Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017), with teachers and students enriching educational possibilities by drawing from ‘the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups’ (Yosso, 2005, p. 69).
3. CRP also goes beyond individual needs and aspirations, whereby the inclusion of Aboriginal and marginalised knowledges is not just a hook to the official curriculum (Apple, 2000), but a way to question and transform the curriculum itself (Alim & Haupt, 2017; Alim et al., 2020; Arnott et al., 2025; Auld et al., 2025; Cairns et al., 2024; Harrison et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2025; Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013; Paris, 2012; Rigney, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2024; Vass et al., 2024). CRP aims not only to make educational outcomes more equitable and schools places where students’ identities are cultivated, but to actively trouble assumptions of dominant knowledges as the ‘epistemological *a priori*’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, p. 75). To this end, CRP actively engages both teachers and students to draw from their own experiences and local and/or marginalised knowledges as well as to engage with key competencies and ‘official knowledge’ to produce *new* knowledge. This dialogic work challenges the assumption that the (usually white) teacher is the knower who imparts knowledge and wisdom upon racially diverse learners (Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017a, p. 15). As Rigney (2021) states in relation to First Nations Australian students, ‘the Aboriginal child as knowledge consumer but never producer is false emancipation’ (p. 579). Thus, dialogical pedagogy is an essential component of an anti-assimilatory education where students are recognised as active citizens who can contribute to ‘intellectual, political, social and economic emancipation’ (Rigney, 2006, p. 42). To this end, CRP has been explicitly described as an imperative for a decolonial project (M. Bishop et al., 2019; Hattam, 2023; Hickey-Moody & Horn, 2022; Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017a; Weuffen, Lowe, Moodie et al., 2023; Zembylas, 2023a).

### **Enacting culturally responsive pedagogies: Rigney and Hattam’s five key ideas**

In the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project, we worked with a particular approach to CRP that had been developed by Rigney and Hattam through the previous project *Toward an*

*Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* (Hattam, 2023; Rigney, 2021). Through an engagement with the literature and in collaboration with educators, our approach focuses on five key ideas, or provocations, that outline key practices of a culturally responsive teacher. They are that educators working with culturally responsive pedagogies need to:

1. Provide high intellectual challenge (challenging).
2. Recognise cultural difference as an asset for learning (positive cultural identities).
3. Connect strongly to students' lifeworlds (strongly connected).
4. Support the performing of learning to an audience and multimodal literacies (audience).
5. Enable an activist orientation (activist).

These five key ideas are illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Rigney and Hattam's five key ideas for an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy (<https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au>)

Drawing on international and Australian scholars, these practices underscore the pivotal role of pedagogical relationships (Bostwick et al., 2025). As A. Morrison et al. (2019) noted, 'the nurturing of trusting, respectful and caring relationships – between students and teachers,

between students and their peers, and between teachers and the families and communities of students – is considered a vital element of CRP’ (p. 21).

The concept of educational relationships can be taken up in a myriad of ways but, as Berryman, Lawrence and Lamont (2018) assert, ‘the catch-cry associated with culturally responsive pedagogies has been “it is all about relationships”. However ... too often, little thought is given to the nature of these relationships’ (p. 9). Using insights gleaned from the literature, the five key ideas draw from theory but are practice oriented, with each addressing the pragmatics of enabling culturally responsive pedagogical encounters (Diplock et al., in press).

These ideas are described more fully below, followed by a brief discussion of how they affected the pedagogy of the teachers who were involved in the two studies.

### ***Provide high intellectual challenge***

Low-challenge pedagogies are intellectually, socially, creatively or affectively undemanding and include what Comber (2015) refers to as ‘fickle literacies’ such as ‘copying and coloring in, which foster compliance and quiet, but little else’ (p. 365). Low-challenge pedagogies are all too common in classrooms with high cultural diversity and high levels of poverty. This can be the result of teachers’ deficit constructions of difference (R. Bishop, 2003; R. Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Phillips & Luke, 2017; Rigney, 2011, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Weuffen, Maxwell et al., 2023) and a subsequent lowering of expectations (Sarra, 2011). Research has shown how an (uncritical) empathy for students can mean the teacher “going soft” on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ (Rose, 2015, p. 72), which Rose (2015) has described as ‘racism by cotton wool’ (p. 72). This is not to argue that the caring and empathetic work of teachers is dispensable, but to make sure that this does not come at the expense of intellectual demand. Rather, as Daniels-Mayes (2016) argues, teachers need to be ‘caring-demanders’.

Ladson-Billings (1995a) emphasised that a culturally responsive pedagogy needs to include an intellectually challenging curriculum in order for students to ‘experience academic success’ (p. 160). This is a crucial aspect of CRP and, as Villegas and Lucas (2002b) explain, it involves

questioning the misguided assumption that students must learn ‘the basics’ through direct instruction, drill, and memorization before they can engage in more academically demanding learning activities. This assumption belies a blindness to the knowledge, skills, and experiences that some students bring to learning and too often denies poor students and students of color a rigorous education. (p. 26)

While high expectations are not enough in themselves (Luke et al., 2013), rigorous, well-planned and purposeful teaching that is intellectually challenging and stimulating and ‘seeded through a focus on high-expectations relationships’ (Sarra et al., 2018, p. 32) is fundamental to CRP (Martin et al., 2025). There are key challenges for teachers who demand students engage

in hard tasks, including students undermining productive pedagogical relationships to resist failing hard tasks, and teachers and students being haunted by deficit views.

### ***Recognise cultural difference as an asset for learning***

Research shows the dominance of deficit perceptions of cultural (and socio-economic) difference (Hattam & Prosser, 2008) permeates settler-colonial education systems (R. Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Rigney, 2021):

Deficit notions render the skills and strengths of minoritized students and families invisible and unimaginable. For a teacher with this mindset implications include not recognizing prior knowledge and experiences of students that could support relevant new learning. (Hogg, 2015, p. 1)

CRP at its core is anti-deficit but, beyond this, CRP foregrounds an awareness of the *strengths* diverse students and families bring to the learning space, to recognise cultural difference as an asset for learning. This means it ‘is not only liberatory and anti-oppressive, it is also affirmative ... [so will] identify, protect, institutionalize, and celebrate all cultural practices’ (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1278). Beyond celebrating, CRP is also about enabling pedagogical reform that gives space for subjugated knowledges and practices to inform curriculum and pedagogy, which constitute the core work of schooling, so that they are recognised as valid and valued and can contribute to key issues and concerns. This is fundamental to developing ‘an alternative model that emphasises empowerment, co-construction and the critical importance of cultural recognition’ (R. Bishop, 2003, p. 221).

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) from the United States argue that in settler-colonial countries CRP needs to centralise First Nations’ sovereignty and Indigenous epistemologies (see also Arnott et al., 2025). In Australia, an Indigenist epistemology, as first proposed by Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1997, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2011), is being developed by First Nations scholars as an important foundation for CRP (Guenther, Rigney et al., 2023; A. Morrison et al., 2019; Rigney, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Rigney et al., 2020). An Indigenist-informed CRP revolves around three main premises: it privileges local, but also national and international, Indigenous voices; it respects the integrity and sophistication of Indigenous knowledges and ways of being and relating; and it is emancipatory and honours self-determination. There are key challenges for teachers who are committed to working with cultural difference as an asset, including feeling paralysed by not knowing how to engage with cultural differences; and the need to counter the trend of liberal multiculturalism, in the name of tolerance, pushing ‘one nation’ and denying systemic racism in Australia.

### ***Connect strongly to students’ lifeworlds***

Culturally responsive pedagogies are based on recognising the ‘virtual backpacks’ (Thomson, 2002) that students bring to school and harnessing these as resources for learning (Hattam &

Prosser, 2006; Prosser et al., 2010; Rigney 2021, 2023c, 2024; Zipin & Brennan, 2018, 2019). Several studies have emphasised the need to engage with students' life experiences as assets for learning; some examples include the productive pedagogies study (Hayes et al., 2006) with its concept of 'connectedness', the multiliteracies project (New London Group, 1996) that advocates a 'situated practice', and turn-around pedagogies (Kamler & Comber 2005). In our model of CRP we drew most strongly from the 'funds of knowledge' approach, as developed by Luis Moll and colleagues (González et al., 2005a; Moll et al., 1992).

Drawing on Lev Vygotsky, Moll (2014) notes that 'the most important resources for educational development are found and abound in our children, families, and local communities' (p. 155). For the funds of knowledge approach then:

The idea ... is to contextualize teaching in the cultural experiences of the learner. The purpose is to facilitate a sense of personal belonging, especially in an academic setting, and a sense of appropriation and control of the practices and outcomes of learning. (p. 157)

There are many different aspects of students' lifeworlds that have been considered in different studies as rich sources for learning. These include place (Burgess, Thorpe et al., 2022b; Coff, 2021; Comber et al. 2006; Coombs et al., 2025; Fredericks, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Harrison et al., 2016; Harrison & Skrebneva, 2020; Jackson-Barrett, 2021; Lowe, Skrebneva et al., 2021; Maher, 2022; Spillman et al., 2023; Thorpe et al., 2021, 2025); language (D'warte, 2018, 2023; D'warte & Slaughter, 2024; Heugh, 2015; Hogarth, 2019; Lucas et al., 2008; Osborne et al., 2020; Rigney & Rinaldi, 2023); religiosity (Abdalla et al., 2020; Hickey-Moody & Horn, 2022; Memon & chanicka, 2024; Memon & Chown, 2023; Memon et al., 2023); family/community (M. Bishop et al., 2019; R. Bishop et al., 2007, 2014; Burgess & Harwood, 2023; Burgess, Grice et al., 2023; Fricker et al., 2023; Lowe, 2017; Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012); and youth culture (Blanch, 2011; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2017). There are key challenges for teachers who are committed to connecting with their students' lifeworlds, including lifeworld knowledges being subjugated to official knowledge; schools' traditional focus on rehearsing already existing knowledge; and dialogic pedagogies being weakly elaborated by schooling systems, which tend to push monologic approaches that focus entirely on 'instruction'.

### ***Support the performing of learning to an audience and the use of multimodal literacies***

Acknowledging the plurality of ways that people express themselves and make meaning is fundamental to CRP, and this calls for diverse ways of communicating in the classroom. This recognises the 'increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on' (New London Group, 1996, p. 64). Here, meaning making is framed beyond language to encompass multiple modes of representation. This recognition means that offering diverse 'forms of representation through which students are permitted to make their meanings

is a critical component in constructing classrooms as hybrid, democratic spaces which value diversity and difference' (Stein, 2008, p. 144).

Rigney (2019) has highlighted that digital literacy is crucial for First Nations Pacific students to be active, agentive citizens in our internet-mediated world. He explains:

Firstly, online environments now allow Indigenous children to create their learning, beyond that which is designed by adults, using their cultural funds of knowledge, languages, and epistemologies ... Secondly ... using digital classrooms makes achievable the development of local online Indigenous content related to the Pacific context. (p. 1040)

As Comber and Hill (2000) argue, we need to 'equip young people with complex repertoires of practices – ways of thinking, analysing, communicating, designing and so on – that assist them to deal with (and in) changing media and modes, new contexts and problems' (p. 80). Multimodalities of learning are employed through dynamic and embodied pedagogical practices such as object-based learning (Flinders University Museum of Art, n.d.) and creative body-based pedagogies (Garrett, 2024; Garrett et al., 2023; Rigney et al., 2020; Wrench & Garrett 2021).

Finding avenues for students to share and demonstrate their learning in ways that are authentic does not just mean being open to different modalities of communication. Offering students opportunities to show their work to different audiences is equally important, so that it can have meaningful purpose beyond just receiving a grade. This draws on literature around 'authentic assessment' (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000) which moves the purpose of learning towards development of 'a socially situated achievement' (McArthur, 2023, p. 94), requiring some kind of 'performative expectation' (Zipin & Reid, 2008) for students to share their work with more than 'just' their teacher. There are key challenges for teachers who are committed to supporting the performing of learning to an audience and the use of multimodal literacies, for example: digital literacies have yet to displace pen and paper; schools suffer from a digital divide, and, for quality assurance, assessment is individualised, and hence the teacher is the only audience.

### ***Enable an activist orientation***

For CRP, a focus on supporting students' achievement is accompanied by addressing power imbalances in ways that go beyond individual student successes. CRP as proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) emerged out of critical race theory (D. Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al., 1996) being applied to education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to critical race theory, racism is not restricted to discrete, anomalous incidents, but is part of our normal and everyday lives. Significant to critical anti-racism work is a broader analysis of political mechanisms of power and the 'nature of ... politics and society' (Gillborn, 2006, p. 21). The 'experiential knowledge' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26) of people who have been marginalised through racialisation is understood as fundamental to this analysis, and



is thereby centralised. (For more on CRT and education, see A. L. Brown et al., 2017; Bunda, 2018; Gillborn, 2006; López & Sleeter, 2023; Vass, 2014, 2015, 2016.)

To be culturally responsive then requires both teachers and students to develop racial literacy (Bargallie & Fernando, 2024; Bargallie et al., 2024; Lentin, 2025). According to Schulz and colleagues (2023b), this includes building an awareness of the racialised landscape of schooling (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2021; Moodie & Fricker, 2023; Moodie et al., 2019; Rudolph, 2023; Rudolph & Fricker, 2025), the intersectionality of race with other social positionings such as class and gender (Oto et al., 2023), and the way educational resources and other media reproduce and/or disrupt racialisations and our interconnectedness (Bargallie & Lentin, 2020; L. Brown et al., 2021). Importantly, being racially literate involves not just a growing awareness of race and racism, but the ability to talk, to listen deeply, and to take action to interrupt and counter racism (L. Brown, 2019; Osborne, 2017, 2023; Schulz et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

Racial literacy requires teachers to cultivate a critical awareness of their own socio-cultural positioning (Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Dover, 2013; Ebersole et al., 2016; Santoro & Kennedy, 2016; Schmeichel, 2012; Siegel, 2017; Villegas, 2007) and the ways that historical and political processes construct the racialised landscape of their practice (Vass, 2014, 2016), and involves engaging with place (Amazan et al., 2024). For the mostly white teacher cohort, being racially literate means confronting the possessive logic of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Moreton-Robinson, 2015), as well as the constructions of ‘goodness’ (Schulz, 2011) that accompany it (Weuffen, 2024). Without this critical awareness, such educators will have little hope of breaking down their ‘epistemic blindness’ (Andriotti, 2016, p. 104), and school practices that are drawn from ontologies foreign to Indigenous and marginalised communities will prevail (Bargallie & Lentin, 2020; Martin et al., 2017).

Students also need to be supported to develop a critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b) and to ‘foster (anti)racist and/or colour-conscious skills and knowledges’ (Vass et al., 2019, p. 356). It is also vital that students be offered opportunities to take action around problems and challenges that matter in their lives (Bajaj et al., 2017; Education for Social Justice Research Group, 1994; Hattam, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2017, 2021a; Maher, 2023; D. M. Rigney et al., 2003; Zipin & Brennan, 2018, 2019), ‘both now and in the future’ (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 174).

This approach contrasts with ‘neoliberal reforms that purport to address racialised achievement gaps [yet] treat racism and culture as if they do not exist’ (Sleeter, 2011a, p. 8), a practice that ‘leaves racism untouched while white people debate its existence or deny its severity’ (Bargallie & Lentin, 2020). Unfortunately, as Ladson-Billings (2014, 2017, 2021a, 2021b) has noted, the critical consciousness and activist aspect of CRP has often been abandoned in the neoliberal school (K. A. Morrison et al., 2008; Sleeter, 2012; E. Young, 2010; Zhang & Wang, 2016), rendering it weak and hollow as an emancipatory pedagogy (Gay, 2021).

While we, along with the teachers who co-designed these five key ideas, contend that these ideas can frame a culturally responsive practice, when practised in real schools with real students, especially in the neoliberalised schooling system, they do not unfold in straightforward, unproblematic ways. There are key challenges for teachers who encourage an activist orientation to learning, including school learning being mostly rendered cognitive, psychological, apolitical and disconnected from students' communities.

## **What does a culturally responsive approach look like?**

From the two projects, *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* and *Culturally Responsive Schooling*, we have shown that, despite operating within an inadequate policy framework, our approach to CRP is viable (Hattam, 2018; A. Morrison et al., 2019; Rigney, 2021, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Schools can enhance their cultural responsiveness, and this leads to multiple positive outcomes, including increased student engagement, renewed teacher enthusiasm for their profession, and the affirmation, engagement and activation of students' cultural identities. For the teachers involved in both projects we noticed the following:

- Becoming culturally responsive involved the teachers rethinking how they understood their roles as educators, the students' competencies and the curriculum.
- Culturally responsive pedagogies involved 'hard fun'.
- Dialogic, improvisational modes of teaching were core pedagogical approaches.
- Education became activist oriented.
- Educators moved to being more affectively available to their students, communities and places.

These five findings are discussed below, with a few quotations from interviews with teachers included in boxes to illustrate each point.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Teachers reimagining how they understand their roles as educators, the students' competencies and the curriculum***

During interviews and more informal conversations, teachers who were involved in our projects discussed how they had come to draw on neoliberalised logics to inform their practice, to a greater or lesser extent. However, through their involvement in CRP action research they experienced shifts in their understanding of students, curriculum knowledge and

I think I went through the whole, 'I am the teacher, and it's my job to know everything and feed it to the children'. (Naomi, CRP)

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<sup>6</sup> Note: Quotations marked CRP are drawn from the project *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*, and those marked CRS are from the project *Culturally Responsive Schooling*.

their roles as educators (Diplock, 2022). Students were repositioned as co-designers and co-researchers, with their diverse backgrounds and ideas recognised as valuable assets for learning (Hattam & Sullivan, 2016). In other words, they were seen ‘as competent subjects and experts of their lifeworlds, capable of producing knowledge for improving their lives and those of their communities’ (Rigney, 2021, p. 579). Teachers acknowledged students’ emotional and affective dimensions while maintaining an educative relationship that balanced respecting students’ knowledges with identifying their learning needs. Simultaneously, teachers reconceptualised their roles, positioning themselves as learners through a ‘humility of knowing’ (Freire, 2005). They approached curriculum knowledge as socially constructed and culturally determined, challenging knowledge hierarchies and co-constructing knowledge with students (Vass et al., 2024).

I think, not that we were viewing the children through a deficit model, but we learnt just how capable and confident they can be when they are engaging with something from their home world or their life world, something that they’re very familiar with and that’s really just important to them. (Annie, CRS)

According to Foucault (1976/1980), truth is integral to the workings of power:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (p. 93)

Importantly, though, there is always ‘a certain degree of freedom’ (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 292) and, where the truths that we have come to work with are troubled, we come to question the practices that sustain hegemonic truth–power relations. As Foucault (1981/2000) states, ‘to

Once they’ve got ownership over things, they seem to be ... They’re in. Again, I just don’t think we’ve given them credit. They were probably always in and we just came in and talked to them. (Bonnie, CRS)

do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy’ (p. 456). For the teachers in our studies, troubling normalised truths about students, their role as educators and the curriculum meant that educative power relations were remodulated, and they moved to more dialogic pedagogical approaches.

### ***Hard fun***

Teachers found their practices moved towards ‘hard fun’. We use this term to describe the role of student engagement through fun to support rigorous academic demands. *Hard fun* involves students being supported to connect and create new, complex ideas by tapping into their existing cultural and cognitive resources in ways that are interesting, engaging and ‘fun’. As Francis (2013) points out, in schools ‘fun is often viewed as an auxiliary component, perhaps as a

My class are ‘well-behaved’, but I love that the hard fun and activism approach [enabled] mature thinking and ideas and engagement in the tasks not because of a ‘grade’ or threat. (Sophie, CRS)

way to break the ice, but not as a true factor in instruction’ (p. 152). She points out that multiple studies have affirmed the value of different forms of fun for enhancing student outcomes, for example:

benefits of using humor include the following: students are more likely to retain content (Korobkin, 1989; Hill 1988; and Garner, 2006); students perceive that they learn more (Wanzer and Frymier, 1999); improved classroom rapport (Haigh, 1999); diffused tensions (Mallard, 1999); increased creativity and divergent thinking (Ziv, 1996); student motivation (Ruggieri, 1999); and stress relief (Lazier, 1991). (p. 154)

The fun is enjoyable but purposeful too. So it’s hard, but there’s a purpose to it and it makes me want to do it. (Chrissy, CRS)

Drawing on affect theory to theorise the way ‘fun’ enhances pedagogical moments, Barrett (2023) argues that enjoyment enriches experiences, explaining ‘that a good feeling is not a special ingredient added to experience but rather a heightening, intensification, or *enrichment* of experience as a whole’ (p. 11, emphasis in original). It is through the actual experiences of

pedagogical encounters that culturally responsive dialogic processes emerge and, according to Spinoza’s ‘ethics of joy’, fun and joyful affective moments are ‘life enhancing’ (Gattens, 2009, as cited in Tamboukou, 2018, p. 871). Fun can be seen as an affective force that augments bodies’ capacities for acting and being open to relational transformation and creative co-construction by elevating the intensities felt in the moment. This is a politics that takes seriously the need for educators and students to be open to pedagogical events as they unfold or, as Thrift (2004) describes it, ‘the politics of a generous sensibility that values above all the creation of “joyful encounters” which can boost the powers of all concerned’ (p. 96). In this way, making education include joyfulness can constitute a form of resistance to ‘all the things our world wants to cheapen – grace, hope, joy, respect, dignity and, yes, fun’ (p. 98).

In the socially just classroom, though, we need to be careful about how we understand the notion of ‘fun’. We need to question what constitutes ‘fun’. Are there certain types of ‘fun’ that are more or less appropriate in the classroom? Who gets to decide what types of ‘fun’ are being prioritised? What happens when some people find a particular event fun, while others do not? What do we even mean by fun?

The way we are using the notion of ‘fun’ here does not mean a synthetic, superficial, individualised ‘fun’. As Zembylas (2020b) notes, education has become swept up in what Ahmed (2010) calls a ‘happiness turn’ through positive psychology and emotional management programs. The problem with such approaches is that they

I think emotions make it a deeper thing. I never thought of that before ... Things are really upsetting sometimes in class, that’s just life. (Melissa, CRP)

assume happiness is an individual and internal experience, which fails to recognise that pleasure is shaped by our connections and interactions with others which are always politically and historically situated (Ahmed, 2010; Holmes & McKenzie, 2019; Jackson & Bingham, 2018; Zembylas, 2020b). As such, an individualised, internalised notion of happiness and

unhappiness ignores the socio-political constructions of these affective responses. While fun may be beneficial pedagogically, ‘negative’ emotions such as unhappiness, discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2015, 2020b, 2023b) and anger (Lorde, 1997; Zembylas, 2014) that ‘kill joy’ (Ahmed, 2023) can be appropriate responses to suffering, social injustices and traumatic events. While this is not without ethical complexities then, Zembylas (2020b) goes as far as suggesting that ‘addressing suffering and unhappiness in the classroom may offer ethical, political and pedagogic lessons in social justice education’ (p. 20) because ‘bad feelings accompany witnessing social inequalities and motivate transformative action toward social justice’ (p. 30).

Clearly this is not to imply that all education should be an *unhappy* experience and devoid of fun. In fact, with the rise of tedious pedagogies, alongside a society of growing inequalities, white supremacist revivals and environmental catastrophes, ‘centering joy and radical love as a means of building resistance, push back, and disruption of dehumanizing practices’ (Pearson & Hernández-Saca, 2024, p. 413) is ‘needed more than ever’ (p. 411). According to Lawson (2024), joy, and specifically ‘black joy’, enables possibilities for school to become what bell hooks (1990, 2001) describes as a ‘homeplace’, which is ‘a site of empowerment, affirmation, and belonging, [and a space that can be used] to heal and resist oppression’ (Lawson, 2024, p. 7). In fact, joy in education can be thought of as crucial for social justice for its own sake, whereby moments of fun and delight are vital for living a rich and fulfilling life. Griffiths (2014) discusses this point, suggesting that social justice is not a state to be worked towards, but emerges or diminishes through processes of living and relating, being ‘grounded in happy, if difficult, personal and community relationships’ (p. 248).

### ***Dialogic, improvisational modes of teaching***

There are multiple versions of dialogic pedagogies (see, e.g., Boomer, 1992; Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998; González et al., 2005a; Hayes et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Pinar, 2004; Shor, 1988; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998; Street, 1994; Thomson & Comber, 2003). Dialogic educational approaches hinge on a transformation of the pedagogical relationships (Berryman & Eley, 2024) between educators and learners ‘from power-imposing models to power-sharing models ... [to] allow all students to participate more successfully through their being able to bring their prior experiences and knowledges to the classroom’ (R. Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 132).

<p>I need to get them involved in where we’re going as well. So that’s not just coming from me telling them this is where we’re going, but where do they want to go? Where are they interested in? (Chrissy, CRS)</p>
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An inquiry-driven approach based on ‘questions rather than answers’ (González et al., 2005b, p. 11), which enables collaborative knowledge creation between educators and students, is foundational for a dialogic pedagogy. Both teachers and students actively share their knowledges, experiences and insights to generate new knowledge. This approach challenges traditional notions of the (often white) educator as the sole authority, disseminating information

to a diverse student body (Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017a, p. 15). In this way, dialogic pedagogy resists assimilationist educational practices.

The dynamic, responsive and co-constructed nature of the dialogic teaching approaches used by the teachers can be described as ‘improvisational pedagogies’. Improvisation in jazz is a highly sophisticated art form that requires deep musical knowledge, technical proficiency and creative intuition. The complexity of jazz improvisation lies in its demand for real-time composition, where musicians must listen carefully to each other and instantaneously create melodic lines that harmonise and maintain a rhythmic coherence. This process involves a nuanced interplay of sophisticated musical elements and spontaneous creativity in response to all players involved.

Like jazz musicians, culturally responsive teachers respond in real time to students’ contributions, adjusting their approach based on the flow of discussion. Improvisational performers build on each other’s contributions, just as dialogic teaching encourages students and teachers to expand on and develop each other’s thoughts. While appearing spontaneous, both require deep knowledge and preparation to execute effectively, and both require comfort with uncertainty and the ability to navigate

I think it’s more about creating a space where we’re collaborating together with the students, and that’s what we mean by power. I tried a few different strategies for that and that was really great. And I think, for me, it was talking less from the teacher perspective and letting students open the floor a little bit, which can be quite hard to do. (Harry, CRS)

unpredictable outcomes. In both improvisation and dialogic teaching, the final ‘product’ surfaces from the collective input of all participants, rather than being predetermined, with novel ideas and unexpected connections created through the interactive process.

In moving towards being culturally responsive, then, school–community and teacher–student relations became more power sharing, dialogic and co-constructive. As Schulz et al. (2023b) recently wrote:

Culturally responsive schooling is not reducible to a checklist model that freezes culture in time. Rather, it is about relationships. It is dynamically responsive to, respectful of, and adaptable to the cultural assets of students and communities, especially those whose assets have been habitually ignored or denied. (p. 40)

[There was] heaps more interaction between the kids. Even people asking other kids they’d never talked to to borrow their laptop charger ... They sound probably minute, to people that don’t understand classrooms. But in a classroom, where a popular boy asks a not so popular girl to borrow her charger, that conversing is huge. (Desi, CRS)

In contrast to a focus on teachers’ knowledge as in models of cultural competence, the locus of pedagogical change was the transformation of the modalities of being in relation. To use the words of R. Bishop et al. (2014), such culturally responsive pedagogical relationships had moved towards ‘non-dominating relations of interdependence’ (p. 210), with teachers

‘listening beyond words’ (Berryman et al., 2018, p. 6) to students and their families (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Berryman et al., 2015), using ‘not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds’ (Delpit, 2006, p. 46).

### *Activist oriented*

An activist orientation emerged as a characteristic of culturally responsive practice, positioning educators and students as participants in collective efforts to address the inequities shaping their lives. This stance aligned with Freire’s (1968/1996) notion of praxis, that is, the ongoing interplay between critical reflection and transformative action, and

It was only when I started to introduce that more, ‘Okay, well you actually want a voice and you want to talk about these things and you want to challenge each other and challenge the school’, and do all those sort of activist kind of stuff that they actually consistently were back in. (Bonnie, CRS)

with Giroux’s (2018) view of teachers as transformative intellectuals who can contribute to democratic renewal. In the classrooms we observed, activism was not treated as a distraction from academic work, but as an authentic and necessary entry point into it.

They [students] are almost too compliant and rely on being told what to do but do so pleasantly. I want them to feel uncomfortable and unsure and think beyond their first idea. (Sophie, CRS)

Teachers found ways to work alongside, and sometimes from within, students’ own social and political concerns. Rather than suppressing expressions of dissent, they recognised these as indicators of students’ critical awareness and invested energy. By framing curriculum tasks

around real issues, educators created space for students to see their schooling as directly connected to matters of consequence. This approach had a re-engaging effect, particularly for students who had previously been alienated by abstract, decontextualised content.

In this way, many of the teachers channelled students’ activist impulses into sustained inquiry, using them as leverage points for higher-order thinking and deeper engagement with disciplinary knowledge. The activist orientation thus operated on two levels: it was a

I feel like I’m moving to more democracy in the class. I’m a lot different now. I think I’m more responsive to kids. (Kiara, CRP)

professional and ethical stance taken by educators, and it was a pedagogical strategy that repositioned students as knowledge makers and change agents. Such practices disrupted the view of schooling as a neutral space, reframing it instead as a collaborative site for imagining and enacting more just futures.

### *More affectively available*

By entering dialogic spaces, teachers modified their approaches to pedagogical encounters, becoming more open and receptive to students' contributions, making themselves flexible and malleable to what students brought to pedagogical encounters and indeed other factors that were part of these moments. This enhanced the potential 'relationality' of pedagogical encounters,

where 'relationality pertains to the *openness* of the interaction' (Massumi, 2002, p. 225, emphasis in original) in ways that could be consciously recognised, but also through shifts in their embodied affective sensibilities.

I've always listened to my students' opinions and negotiated. But I think that this enhanced it a bit more. I can't assume the culture of my kids. I can't assume what I think they want to do. (Melissa, CRP)

I said 'Oh, right, so what am I doing today that is going to get these kids to engage in that activity? And who is actually responding to what I'm doing?' Actually looking at how that affected the kids in the class, really observing what was going on in there, like watching their faces, that's a new thing for me. I feel like a changed teacher. (Naomi, CRP)

Massumi (2015) explains that individuals use a range of '*affect modulation techniques* ... [which are] accessible to the event through reflex, habit, training and the inculcation of skills' (p. 96, emphasis in original). Importantly, he adds that affect modulation techniques 'cannot be reduced to slavish repetition, a lack of freedom to manoeuvre' (p. 96) but can be transformed. Also drawing on the metaphor of improvisation, Massumi explains that:

Affect can be modulated by improvisational techniques that are thought-felt into action, flush with the event. This thinking-feeling of affect, in all its immediacy, can be *strategic*. Since it modulates an unfolding event on the fly, it cannot completely control the outcome. But it can inflect it, tweak it. (p. 96, emphasis in original)

The teachers in our studies transformed their modes of being in relation through a greater affective openness to students and classroom events. This resonates with aspects of Bozalek and colleagues' (2018) 'pedagogy of response-ability' (see also Bozalek & Zembylas, 2023), which involves both 'attentiveness and responsibility, and how those elements

And you focused really on looking at the kids, and are they engaged, and why aren't they engaged? And could it be because they're not interested? Do they not like this task? Are they just having a bad day? You're more thinking about, is my learning capturing these kids' attention or is it not? Rather than why won't they do the work kind of thing. (Brett, CRS)

combine towards a responsive pedagogy' (Bozalek et al., 2018, p. 97). The first of these processes, *attentiveness*, entails our capacity to be affected; it 'involves regarding and listening carefully, opening ourselves to being affected by the other and making an effort to suspend our own concerns' (p. 101). As Diplock (2022) explains:

A response-able pedagogy is one that is invested in the ways that different elements of each pedagogical encounter are able to affect and be affected by each other.



Importantly, in a response-able pedagogy, the capabilities and richness that difference has to offer is enhanced and not diminished. Rather than a pedagogy that assumes a morality of best outcomes, it is a pedagogy that takes on an ethics of ‘affirming difference’ (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007, p. 4), that ‘requires a more radical opening up to difference than mere (mis)recognition allows’ (Zembylas, 2006, p. 313). This is an ethics that seeks to avoid subjugating and assimilating the other through a one-way process of the school affecting ‘them’, and instead enables the other to affect the school. (p. 229)

Culturally responsive pedagogies describe a manner of engaging with others, rather than a collection of tightly defined strategies or specific practices. It involves a set of commitments that a teacher takes on, works with and develops over time in collaboration with their particular students, communities and places.

Yes, it [CRP] definitely works with super diverse groups ... You can see how it works, it's in multiple settings. And I think the fact we've now seen it in four different schools with multiple different teachers, is that proof (Chrissy, CRS)

In the next chapter we outline some of the key literature related to action research. Put simply, the very possibility of teachers being able to enact culturally responsive pedagogies rises or falls on whether schools can provide productive forms of professional learning that can transform classroom practices (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment). For this reason, our projects adopted an action research approach, which we discuss in the following chapter.

In sum, culturally responsive pedagogies represent a dynamic and relational approach to teaching that values students’ cultural assets and situates learning within their lived experiences. The enactment of these pedagogies requires teachers to reimagine their roles, challenge deficit framings, and build dialogic, intellectually demanding and activist-oriented classrooms. Yet, the capacity for teachers to take up this work depends on the kinds of professional learning environments in which they are situated. To this end, the following chapter turns to the role of action research as both a methodology and a professional learning approach that enables educators to critically inquire into their own practice and sustain culturally responsive pedagogical change.



## Critical action research

This chapter examines the role of critical action research in advancing culturally responsive schooling. Action research has long been used as a methodology for professional learning and school reform, but in our projects it is taken up as a critical and collaborative mode of inquiry through which educators can become more culturally responsive. The following sections outline why critical action research is central to this work, provide a brief history of the approach, identify its key elements, describe how it is enacted in school settings, and explore the different modalities through which it can operate.

### Why critical action research?

Whilst critique of the contemporary policy regime is essential (Ball et al., 2011; Braun et al., 2011), we still need to devise a positive project that can inform leaders' work and the demands to lead professional learning in their schools. With that in mind, a starting point for such a project is outlined in the following constellation of propositions:

1. A viable school reform initiative demands sustaining a 'professional learning community'. We require 'professional learning communities' that provide the conditions for teachers to redesign curriculum and pedagogy, focus on improving students' achievement, privilege the classroom challenges of teachers, hook teachers up to international literature, and support action research approaches of professional learning and knowledge production.
2. The key focus for any reform initiative should be improving students' achievement in mainstream classrooms. All participants should focus on improving students' achievement, especially in the mainstream curriculum. Other outcomes such as attendance, aspirations, engagement and wellbeing all feed into the key focus of achievement in the mainstream curriculum. Focusing on Year 11 and Year 12 is too late if we want to sustain long-term improvements in students' achievement as young people start tuning out in the middle years (or even before that).
3. To improve students' achievement in mainstream classrooms requires re-designing practice or, more precisely, re-designing curriculum and pedagogy. Sustaining significant improvement to students' achievement demands that a critical mass of teachers engage in real changes to their classroom practice. Improving students' achievement is a curriculum issue, that is, it demands rethinking the nature of the learning tasks set for students. Improving students' achievement is a challenge for pedagogy, that is, it demands practices that enable students' success.
4. To improve students' achievement in mainstream classrooms demands getting past deficit thinking about the students and, as such, demands that students are set challenging and engaging learning tasks that strongly connect students' lifeworlds to the school curriculum, and that provide students with an opportunity to perform their learning. The key challenge

is sustaining positive relationships whilst setting students hard things to do in class. Responding to this challenge means setting challenging learning tasks that are meaningful to the students and that can culminate in producing high-quality learning artefacts/performances. Challenging learning tasks also provide opportunities for students to show off their learning in public.

5. Action research provides a reputable model for framing a rigorous and systematic professional development approach. Transformative action research usually involves critical friends capable of offering critique and provocations, and is conducted in learning communities and is hence collaborative. Action research demands collection of classroom data including teachers' and students' understandings, evidence of students' learning (including artefacts), curriculum planning documents, and data that capture key teaching moments (observations, audio or video). Transformative action research is often more credible if augmented by other data, such as school context and interviews with participants.
6. Students' achievement in mainstream classrooms can be enhanced if the initiative incorporates a strong version of 'student voice', in both the research aspects and in the curriculum projects. Previous projects that incorporated 'student voice' as a key element of the research pursued a students as co-researchers approach where students were active participants in the conduct of the research. As key participants in the curriculum reform aspects of such an initiative, we might develop a students-as-researchers approach in any curriculum projects. Students would be provided with opportunities to be constructors of new knowledge and not merely rehearse already existing knowledge.
7. A sustainable school reform initiative of this kind requires 'educational' leadership and a whole-school change approach. Driving improvements in students' achievement requires 'educational' leadership, which here is defined in terms such as 'instructional leadership', 'leading learning', 'curriculum leadership' and 'pedagogical leadership'. 'Educational' leadership is often distributed in large secondary schools. Whole-school change approaches recognise that restructuring and reculturing provide the enabling conditions for re-designing curriculum and pedagogy. Whole-school change approaches aim for strong coherence across school planning, curriculum development and teacher professional development.

In this chapter we review literature that outlines the history of action research in Australia, its rationale as an appropriate research methodology, models for high-quality professional learning in schools, recent developments in action research in Australia and the version of action research that was enacted in both ARC-funded studies.

This literature review aims to provide an account of research that informs recent developments in the culturally responsive school in Australia. Such a review has to engage with the whole-school change literature, which will be discussed in the next chapter and, as we will see, an account of whole-school reform must work with research that takes seriously the significance

of school-based professional learning. This review advocates the view that whole-school reform is actually driven by a school's professional learning program and the success of a school strategic plan agenda rests heavily on the success of the school-based professional learning. Unfortunately in Australia of late, schooling policy has been coopted by the so-called *what works* (Biesta, 2007) learning science paradigm. Rather arrogantly and erroneously, this paradigm claims to privilege truth about evidence-based practice and the reform agenda, and professional learning becomes structured around telling teachers what is the right answer and then expecting them to implement the strategies. Of course, such a process is doomed to fail because we are talking about changing complex classroom practices, which requires much more elaborate forms of practice-centred learning. And further, the what works paradigm asserts decontextualised truth claims about teaching – they always work everywhere and unproblematically, it seems. Again, such truth claims do not attend to the complex contextual differences between schools. When advancing culturally responsive teaching, attending to these differences is the point. We are after all trying to enact pedagogies that enable all students to feel positive about their own cultural identities, and to work with the lifeworlds of the students, and every classroom cohort is unique and different.

We therefore require forms of professional learning that advance a 'what works *here?*' mentality. This must begin with classroom teachers naming their classroom challenges as the starting point for professional development, not implementing the right answer.

### **A short history of action research**

The term 'action research' has many meanings that are highly contested in theory and practice. As well, there are other terms, such as practitioner research, teacher research, practitioner inquiry and critical reflection, that some people use to designate research used by teachers to examine their own theory and/or practice. The *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* and *Culturally Responsive Schooling* projects used the term 'action research' because we think the term accurately describes what we had in mind.

'Action research' has a long history in the social sciences, being developed in the 1920s as a transformative approach to knowledge production. As such, action research has been developed as an approach to building knowledge that brings together the imperative to know and the need to change the world. Some social problems, especially those that involve 'improving practice', demand approaches to knowing that do not artificially separate understanding and action. The action research approach has a well-developed philosophical/epistemological grounding and extensive published case studies in various disciplines, including nursing, community development, feminist studies, Indigenous studies and education.

In education, action research has various well-developed versions including those developed in the UK by Stenhouse (1975), in the US by Noffke and Stevenson (1995), and in Australia by Kemmis and McTaggart (1990), Smyth (1989), Moore and Reid (Education for Social

Justice Research Group, 1994), and Comber (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Comber, 2013). Action research has its own journals (e.g., *Educational Action Research*), and is well represented in handbooks of qualitative research (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Someck & Noffke, 2009) and in the *Review of Research in Education* (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

In Australia, action research was developed in the 1970s–80s in conjunction with the school-based curriculum development movement. As such, action research has been connected to a range of innovative curriculum development projects such as the Disadvantaged Schools Program (Connell & White, 1989; Connell et al., 1991; Thomson, 2002) and the National Schools Network (Harradine, 1996). Such projects assume that educational innovations are driven by teachers as producers of knowledge. As well, action research has been incorporated into teacher education (both undergraduate and postgraduate).

Action research in Australia was championed and developed by educational researchers from Deakin University. McTaggart and Garbutcheon-Singh (1986, 1988) provide a neat chronology of their development of action research, locating four generations of action research. The first generation is the early history of the idea: the term action research was coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin around 1944 (Kemmis, 1982). Lewin (1946) describes a research spiral that:

is composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact-finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, for preparing the rational basis for the planning the third step, and perhaps modifying again the overall plan. (p. 33)

The second generation was ‘practical’ action research conducted in Britain in the 1970s, and exemplified by the article ‘Teacher education for curriculum reform: An interim report on the work of the Ford Teaching Project’ (Elliott & Adelman, 1975). The work of Lawrence Stenhouse is cited as the basis of the design of this project. Lawrence Stenhouse’s (1975) foundational work was the first serious attempt to develop a cogent educational thesis for the ‘teacher-as-researcher’. In so doing he developed persuasive arguments against the objective and process models of educational research. The Ford Teaching Project was perhaps the first significant attempt to put Stenhouse’s thesis into practice. The nature of this kind of action research was clearly defined by Elliott and Adelman (1975):

1. To identify and diagnose in particular situations the problems teachers face in their attempt to implement Inquiry/Discovery teaching effectively, and to explore the extent to which these problems can be generalized, e.g. across subject areas and age levels.
  2. To discover effective strategies for resolving problems in particular classrooms and to explore the extent to which these strategies can be generally applied.
  3. To clarify the aims, values and principles of Inquiry/Discovery teaching in general.
- (p. 107)

The curriculum problem was clearly located in the classroom, and the role of the teacher was a central concern. Action research was conceived of as a method to improve teaching and learning. Techniques for teacher-centred action research were developed, giving teachers a new status as researcher. The action research enterprise allows teachers to reflect more powerfully on their theories about what is happening in their classrooms. Second-generation action research was generally reflective teacher research dominated by either technical or practical interests, posing research questions within the existing situation. The technical interest gave rise to questions such as, ‘What can I do and how best can I do it?’ and the practical interest focused on problems such as, ‘What should I do and why ought I do it?’ (Tripp, 1990, p. 160).

The third generation, and specifically the Deakin University researchers, pushed action research in a more ‘critical’ direction. The term critical here invokes a specific epistemology and, borrowing from Habermas (1972), it involves an interest in emancipatory knowledge (McTaggart 1994). Third-generation action research asks emancipatory questions about the assumptions underlying the present social order. This form of action research is called critical, socially critical or emancipatory action research and is a refinement of the theory and practice of action research in light of its being co-opted by the idea that action research is ‘too individualistic, too little aware of the social construction of reality, and too poorly attuned to the social processes and politics of change’ (Kemmis, 1989, p. 20).

For McTaggart and Garbutcheon-Singh (1986, 1988) the fourth generation was still evolving. Obviously we are nearly 40 years hence and the ongoing development or reinvigoration of action research is well beyond the scope of McTaggart and Garbutcheon-Singh’s history. Such a reinvigoration can be accounted for by two distinct directions: 1) responses to critiques of action research; and 2) ongoing reinvigoration of critical social theory. On the first theme, we can mention the following:

- Emancipatory or critical action research is criticised for being overly theoretical, and hence out of touch and out of reach of the classroom, and ‘such attempts to separate claims of what *is* action research from how it functions, ironically, deny what it *is*’ (Gore, 1991, p. 48).
- Our approach also takes heed of various recent developments in action research. From Gore (1997), we affirm that ‘systematic collection and analysis of data is fundamental to the project of developing a theory of pedagogy’ (p. 211). If the aim is to ‘help practitioners to change what occurs in classrooms’ then we require ‘socially recognisable evidence’ (p. 214). Specifically she outlines the importance of ‘systematic, meticulous, tedious, detailed observations’ of ‘pedagogical sites’ (p. 215), involving ‘detailed field notes of events’ (p. 215) and interviews ‘conducted with participants’ (p. 215).
- Gore et al. (2015) also highlight the following methods which we incorporated into our approach: developing a shared set of concepts and language through professional

reading; providing detailed protocols for teachers to guide their observations; and engaging teachers in rigorous analysis of their own data.

- From Hattam and Sullivan (2016) we borrow the notion of the school as a key site of reform and hence the demand to examine pedagogy as an ‘ongoing practical accomplishment’ (Freebody & Freiberg, 2012, p. 80), constituted out of ‘practical reasoning’ or ‘practical theorising’ (p. 80) at the local school level. Those working in schools ‘use the resources [available] within the [school] to: constitute the rationality of action, intelligibly and collaboratively make meaning, solve interactional problems, and in general, work to ensure the smooth running of situated everyday activities [i.e. pedagogy]’ (p. 83). We are interested in examining school structures: the use of time and space, groupings of staff and students, staff roles, organisation of curriculum and use of technology; and school cultures: values, beliefs, assumptions, habits, patterns of behaviour and relationships in schools’ organisational cultures.

Collaborative and participatory action research has growing influence internationally and in Australian educational research, contributing to teacher capacity building and professional renewal in local settings (Diplock, forthcoming; Hattam et al., 2009; Somekh, 2006).

### Three key elements of action research

The account offered in this section is informed primarily by the *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* and *Culturally Responsive Schooling* projects, together with the broader suite of research outlined in Appendix A. Rather than presenting a literature review, the section distils the shared understandings of action research that have developed across these programs over two decades of practitioner inquiry. For this reason, it does not include extensive citations; the intent here is to synthesise the methodological principles that have repeatedly proven generative in our own research contexts, rather than re-survey external scholarship.

Teachers are constantly, perhaps unconsciously, making decisions about their teaching practice. They are continually refining what they do about individual students, assessment, worthwhile learning activities and a whole range of other issues. This process of reflection usually occurs on the run, so to speak, usually while engaged with the teaching/learning process. Usually reflection occurs as a solitary event. Action research is much more than this. Action research is a collaborative approach to working in schools by teachers committed to improving their teaching for the benefit of all students. For our purpose action research has three key elements: operational or technical, collaboration, and critical reflection.

- **Operational.** Most action research approaches describe some form of research spiral, such as: (i) plan, act observe, reflect, or (ii) describe, inform, confront, reconstruct. The spiral provides a set of stages or a process to work with. In reality the process is a bit messier, but the spiral is a useful format to guide planning.



- **Collaboration.** The research process is best conducted in a network of critical friends; a critical community. In our projects, this means having the opportunity to reflect and plan with other teachers and university researchers. A community of critical learners aims to provide an environment where people can share frustrations, ideas and strategies, as well as critical, supportive feedback about their work in schools.
- **Critical reflection.** Being ‘critical’ in action research is about seeing teachers’ work in context. Critical reflection ponders such questions as: In whose interests? How did things get to be this way? How can schooling be changed to serve the most disadvantaged students? Critical reflection examines the following: the discourse or language of school – how people talk about and categorise teaching and students; activities – what counts as learning and participation; and the structures and organisation – how people relate to each other (power and authority relations).

## What is good action research?

Attempting to define good action research requires a lot more space than we have here, but to begin the process we want to suggest the following characteristics.

**Focused on improving practice.** Action research projects aim to improve practice; and in the case of classroom action research the focus is to improve teaching and learning (pedagogy).

**Owned by teachers/the school.** Most importantly, action research is research that is owned by the teacher and conducted on the teacher’s own practice. Action research does not involve someone researching someone else. Action research may involve others as facilitators or critical friends, but the process must be owned by the participating teachers. The process is most powerful if teachers get to design their own questions and have complete control of the research process. Action research can be used as a part of performance management, but this may impede the process if teachers feel that their careers are on the line.

**Has a well-defined, clear research problem/question.** In the *Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* and *Culturally Responsive Schooling* projects, the general research problem that we hoped participating teachers would work with was: *How can teachers build pedagogy that engages the lifeworlds of their students and that enables success?* We anticipated that this generative question would be the basis for a whole range of classroom action research projects. The quality of the specific action research questions of teachers often determines the outcome, so it is important to spend time thinking about the question. It should prompt an inquiry into something that you really do not know in advance. The question needs to be a real inquiry into practice.

**Systematic examination involving collection and analysis of evidence/data.** What distinguishes action research from daily reflection by teachers about their teaching is the demand for systematic examination of evidence/artefacts/data. This can take the form of

journals, student artefacts from classroom learning, video, audio, questionnaires, records, interviews and so on. The sort of rigorous reflection that is required demands some artefacts that can be analysed and thought about at some time after the lesson. Memory is not enough.

***Produces teachers' own knowledge about what works in their context.*** Because action research focuses on teachers' own practice, it aims to produce knowledge about what works in their own context. As such, in the first instance, the teachers are interested in the intricacies of their own situation and not the need to generalise. Many teachers have developed very sophisticated knowledge about practices that work in their context: action research provides an opportunity to document this knowledge and examine how it might be further improved.

***Collaborative and professional community building.*** Good action research works to undermine the privatism that disempowers teachers and that impedes redesigning teaching practice. Research roundtables and project working groups aim to provide a context for professional community building.

***Making the ordinary 'extraordinary'.*** Many experienced teachers treat their quite complex theory and practice as ordinary, even mundane. But teaching is a very complex practice – it is quite extraordinary – and action research provides a process to reveal some of the complexity in ways that can be examined, modified, documented and redesigned.

## **The doing of action research in schools**

***The gap between the intended, enacted and real curriculum.*** Teachers work in a context in which the intended curriculum (what is planned/documentated) often does not match either the enacted (what the teacher does) or real curriculum (what the students experience). Research in schools examines these gaps.

***The significant issues need problem posing not problem solving.*** The most significant problems for teachers, such as making the curriculum relevant for their students, cannot be fixed through conventional problem-solving approaches. Instead, problem posing is required. Problem posing is not about finding the solution but about problematising the situation. Problematising is a process in which you assume there is more to the matter than meets the eye. A starting point for problematising is a realisation that common sense has probably deceived you. Problematising requires uncovering the complexity of the situation. Rather than seeking an immediate resolution, there is a need to realise that many issues need careful consideration – the situation is treated as open-ended, not necessarily unresolvable but requiring more information, a range of perspectives and greater participation by others to get a more satisfactory result.

***School change is messy: It requires an integration of restructuring, reculturing and changing pedagogy.*** The significant issues also require whole-school changes. Such changes can be understood to involve restructuring, reculturing and changing pedagogy. In our projects

we have aimed to work out how restructuring and reculturing can be made to work to bring about pedagogical innovation.

***Schools are very pragmatic and mostly interested in improving practice.*** Research in schools is mostly driven by the imperative to improve practice; it is practice after all that determines learning outcomes. As such the knowledge interests of teachers are usually not abstracted theory but curriculum and pedagogical practice. We need a research approach that focuses on improving practice.

***Being reflective requires effort and conducive conditions.*** Reflective practice, such as action research, does not just happen but requires conducive conditions and effort on the part of teachers. At a minimum, action research in schools requires support from school leaders, time to design a coherent research project, critical friends to discuss the research and resources to conduct the research. In our projects, we convened research roundtables and supported teachers-as-researchers in schools.

***Teachers are theorists.*** Teachers are often represented as being disinterested in theory, but in reality good teachers are uncanny theorists of school systems, school reform and their own practice. ‘Theory’ in this case is about making sense of what is going on and how things might be improved. Teacher theorists are open to thinking about their practice in new ways, especially ways that are informed by the research of others.

***Schools do have some autonomy.*** Many teachers focus on the impediments to change and lose sight of the autonomy that schools actually have available to them. The sort of autonomy we have attempted to activate in our projects is the freedom to design and implement curriculum through negotiation with students.

***Teachers are the key to reform efforts.*** The rationale for our projects is a concern to improve learning outcomes for students who traditionally do not experience success at school. Improving learning requires changes to teaching practice, and that can only occur if teachers are viewed as the key to the reform. Building pedagogy that connects to the lifeworlds of students can only be managed at the classroom level.

***Leadership is essential in all of the above.*** Reforms of this type require supportive leadership. Crucially, such leadership is not merely administrative but relational, creating the conditions in which teachers can take intellectual risks and engage in inquiry with confidence. Supportive leadership must also be attuned to the political dimensions of critical action research, recognising that questioning entrenched practices or assumptions can be uncomfortable. Leaders who actively protect and advocate for teacher-researchers help sustain the integrity of the work and enable change.

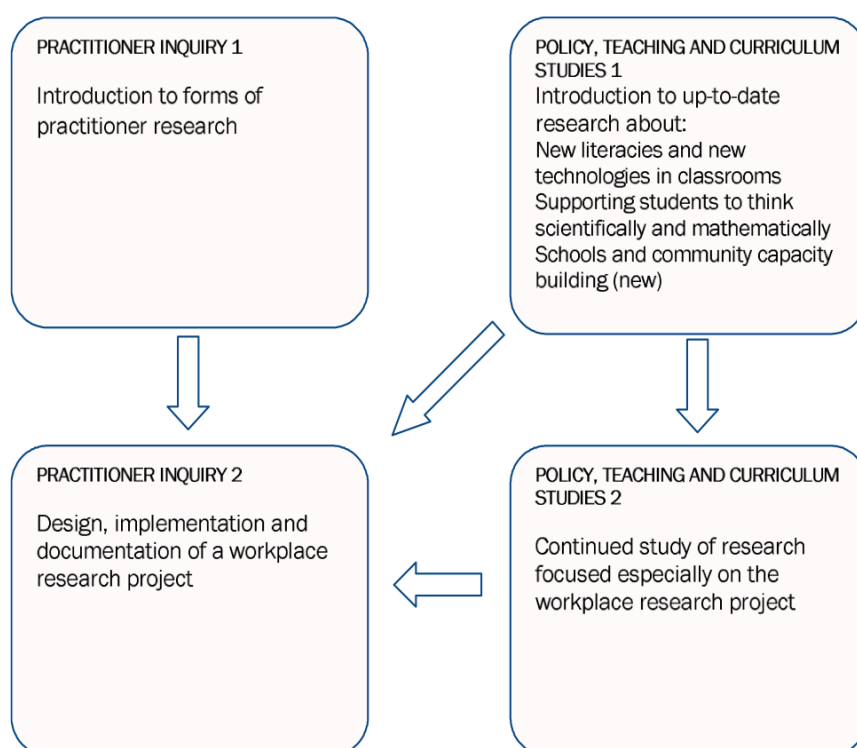
## Modalities of Action Research

There are many modalities for conducting action research. Perhaps the most common is action research conducted by an individual teacher in a school who has been involved in some professional learning and can confidently conduct some action research in their own classrooms or who has access to resources which enable them to conduct their own action research (see <https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au/>). As well, it is possible for a whole school to support an action research approach to professional learning, and hence teacher action research projects can be conducted collaboratively with colleagues (see <https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au/case-studies-section/#leadership>).

For the sake of this literature review, though, we are interested in reviewing the various modalities of action research that can be conducted that involve collaboration between schoolteachers, early childhood educators and/or schools, and university researchers.

### *Graduate certificate, honours, master of education and/or doctoral studies*

Action research can be adopted as the methodology for researching teaching in graduate certificate, honours, master of education and/or doctoral studies. The University of South Australia ran a graduate certificate program in the early to mid 2000s that offered the following courses as a part-time one-year program, as summarised in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** University of South Australia graduate certificate program (mid-2000s)

The Practitioner Inquiry 1 course introduced the students (practising teachers) to the literature on action research in Australia and supported the design of an action research project that emerged in Policy, Teaching and Curriculum Studies 1. Practitioner Inquiry 2 supported the enactment of the action research and a report on the findings. Again, the reading in Policy, Teaching and Curriculum Studies 2 supported the analysis and drafting of the report in Practitioner Inquiry 2. The graduate certificate was half a master of education. The Policy, Teaching and Curriculum Studies courses were designed as shell programs that could focus on a range of themes, including inclusive education, community capacity building, teacher inquiry, and science and maths teaching.

The University of South Australia has offered courses in its master of education that were framed by an action research approach. During the past decade these courses have included New Pedagogy Studies, Leading Learning in Globalising Times, and Leading Professional Learning Communities. Each of these courses was designed around two key assessment tasks:

*Assessment 1:* Draft a theorised account of a key challenge for you as a leader of professional learning in your workplace.

*Assessment 2:* Draft an account of what you plan to do about the challenge you have identified in Assessment 1 and frame your responses in published case studies of educational leadership.

These two assessment tasks were driven by identifying practice challenges for the participating students but also demanded engagement with leadership literature that provides explanatory conceptual resources for the challenge. Assessment 2 was a theorised account of changes to leadership practice that responded to the challenge identified but also referenced hopeful accounts of interventions by others.

Action research is also a possible approach for doctoral studies and examples include Sellar (2009) and Bills (2015).

### ***Professional learning community in the form of ‘research roundtables’***

Collaborative and participatory action research has growing influence internationally and in Australian educational research, contributing to teacher capacity building and professional renewal in local settings (Hattam et al., 2009; Somekh, 2006). Such methodologies enable the systematic examination of the re-designing of pedagogic practice by teachers. The *Re-designing Pedagogies in the North* project (Hattam et al., 2009; Zipin & Hattam, 2009) provides an exemplar: convening and sustaining a professional learning community in the form of ‘research roundtables’ (Ladwig & White 1996) drawing on teachers from across a number of participating schools and establishing conditions for critical reflection; inviting teachers to read relevant research collaboratively with university researchers; focusing on improving theory and practice; fostering teacher/school ownership; and systematically collecting and analysing evidence.

In action research using this model, academic researchers convene research roundtables for the participating teachers, and roundtable meetings are convened twice a term. Each year involves one complete research cycle: orientation and designing a research question; designing a significant teaching sequence; teaching the new unit, doing the action research and collecting data/evidence; analysing the data and theorising; and representing findings for colleagues and future practice. The academic researchers also provide a range of resources already developed to assist teachers in the complete cycle, including readings on pedagogy, templates for supporting action research, instructions for collecting appropriate data, and templates for presenting their findings.

## **Whole-of-school action research**

### ***Augmented action research***

Broadly speaking, our projects have used a *critical action research approach* that was augmented with methods borrowed from educational ethnography and policy sociology:

- A. Establish and sustain a collaborative research community across a cluster of schools to produce new professional and scholarly knowledge about culturally responsive pedagogical practice.
- B. Review the archive of educational research in settler colonial countries for rationales, theories and descriptions of practice for culturally responsive pedagogy.
- C. Analyse Australian federal and state policy texts in the area of Indigenous schooling to ascertain how problems are named and how solutions are proposed.
- D. Develop an augmented approach to action research that brings together data sets from classroom action research over two years, in 10 schools, with data about school structures and school culture.
- E. Advance descriptions and theorisations of an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy that will inform teacher education, school-based professional development, and schooling and Indigenous policy in different Australian jurisdictions.

### ***Engaged ethnography***

Broadly speaking, *engaged ethnography* brings together methods borrowed from educational ethnography, critical policy analysis and educational action research. As noted earlier, our projects have worked from the proposition that the school is a key site of reform (Hayes et al., 2017), and of translation and enactment of policy. Engaged ethnography examines schools as sites for building culturally responsive approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Whilst such research is not an ethnography in the strictest sense of the term, the approach uses ethnographic methods, such as interviews, classroom observations, meeting observations, analysis of

classroom artefacts and various texts, including policies. And most importantly, engaged ethnography involves examination of attempts by a school to transform school structures and school culture, and to reform curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The version of engaged ethnography our projects have adopted involved the researchers leading action research informed by our version of CRP (see the ‘Culturally responsive pedagogies’ chapter for a discussion of our five key ideas), in which case the ethnography was not examining what was happening at the school *per se*, but what the leaders and teachers got up to as they engaged in reform.

This chapter has outlined the significance of critical action research as both a methodology and a professional learning framework for enacting culturally responsive schooling. It traced the history of action research, identified its key elements, and described how collaborative practitioner inquiry enables teachers to transform curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in response to their students’ cultural and linguistic knowledge. Importantly, it has demonstrated that sustained pedagogical change depends on institutional conditions that support such inquiry. However, many schools in Australia do not currently prioritise or provide the time or support for capacity building required for educators to engage meaningfully in action research. Without the enabling conditions from school leadership, opportunities for teachers to undertake this form of professional inquiry remain limited. The following chapter therefore turns to research on educational leadership, a crucial body of work for understanding how systemic and cultural change can create the enabling conditions for culturally responsive schooling.





## **Educational leadership**

School leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the conditions through which culturally responsive schooling becomes possible. Leadership determines not only the operational and policy frameworks of a school, but also the relational, emotional and pedagogical climates that enable teachers and students to thrive. This chapter reviews key strands of the educational leadership literature relevant to culturally responsive schooling. It is organised around five main areas: critical leadership studies, followed by a critique of the educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) literature, then an overview of the scholarship on school leadership and affect/emotion, a section outlining some of the key international models for leading the culturally responsive school, and to bring this all together the chapter finishes with a brief discussion of whole-school reform. Together, these perspectives provide insights into how leadership can move beyond managerialism towards forms of practice that are ethically, relationally and pedagogically responsive to cultural diversity.

### **Critical leadership studies**

Critical leadership studies (CLS) in education juxtaposes educational leadership studies with critical social theories and hence foregrounds imperatives for more justice in education (Grace, 2000; Smyth, 1989). Thomson et al. (2013) argue for a (post)critical tradition of leadership studies that ‘mobilizes social theory in order to re-problematize dominant ways of thinking about leadership and change’ (p. 156). Gunter (2001) explains that CLS challenges notions of visionary leaders and seeks to understand their experiences in contested policy spaces by ‘engaging with real life real time practice, so that the experiences of practice are both captured and theorised’ (p. 104).

To borrow and bend a concept from Ian Hacking (1986), education policy makes up leaders. People who are hired to lead schools obviously bring their own individuality to the task, but in large part their leadership is constituted inside of complex policy regimes that define their work and certainly define what it means to be a ‘good’ leader. Policies provide school budgets, mostly experienced by the schools we study as serious limits to autonomy. Policies determine curriculum frameworks that must be implemented by their teachers. Policies determine which teachers get to teach in their schools. Policies determine the structures of their schools, including the state of the building, the availability of technology or not, and even the structures of the school day and the roles of others in leadership roles in their schools. Policies determine modalities of accountability which drive the sorts of conversation leaders have with their line managers. Policies determine the sorts of relationships that leaders can have with their communities and with governing councils. Any stories we might tell about school leadership are thus from the outset an account of the sorts of discourses, or power/knowledges, educational systems and government support that bring school leaders into existence. But then of course power hides and pretends that its knowledges are somehow outside of power relations. As well,

contemporary policy discourses are no longer entirely about enforcing rules and procedures, restricting people or repression but rather for ‘determining how teachers and leaders should *think* and *feel* about what they produce’ (Willmott, 1993, p 523).

The globalisation of policy reform now means the adoption of ‘one size fits all’ (Perryman et al., 2011, p. 183) neoliberalising policy technologies. In Australia, such a regime is characterised by the logics of local school management, standards-based national curriculum (the Australian Curriculum), accountability through high-stakes testing (NAPLAN), professional standards for teachers and principals, and marketising and privatising of the school sector. But schools are diverse:

[s]chools are not of a piece, they are complexly structured and culturally diverse – in terms of geography, departments and subject cultures (Goods, 1983), support services, professional identities, and the distribution of students. These diversities and distributions also produce spaces of avoidance and creativity and different ways of being a teacher and doing teaching. (Ball et al., 2011, p. 617)

CLS works against mainstream educational leadership research framed inside of the school effectiveness/school improvement paradigm, which Eacott (2010) argues has a ‘relatively weak quality profile’ (p. 265), lacks ‘effective theoretical development’ (p. 266), ‘has a reputation of being deeply conservative’ (Waite, 1998, as cited by Eacott, 2010, p. 266) and ‘has done little more than offer a large number of different models and framework’ (p. 267) or various versions of ‘adjectival leadership’ (p. 267). Such a view of leadership research is almost completely captive to the logics of governing and does not provide any resource for thinking otherwise than arguing for policy compliance. In concert with neoliberalising policy logics, too much of policy studies is now dominated by the school effectiveness and school improvement paradigm (Slee & Weiner, 2001; Thrupp, 2001), which provides overly simplistic definitions of policy, and which is ‘seen unproblematically as an attempt to “solve a problem”’ (Braun et al., 2011, p. 586). Such policy studies are also instrumental and hierarchical, and ‘the teacher[s] and “other adults” working in and around schools, are bleached out of the policy process or positioned as “implementers”’ (Maguire et al., 2015, p. 485). Perhaps most seriously, such policy making tends ‘to assume “best possible” environments for “implementation”: ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources’ (p. 595) and hence suffers from an idealism based on a convenient ‘reality’ deficit.

Rather than decontextualised models of leadership in the form of lists of traits and/or behaviours exhibited by effective leaders, critical leadership studies (CLS) aims to provide powerful explanatory accounts of what is happening to principals’ work and subjectivity, as well as the ways in which educational leadership itself is being constituted by policy. CLS also elaborates more hopeful accounts of how educational leadership might contribute to advancing more socially just outcomes in educational institutions, including in this case schools. As a conceptual framework for examining leadership in schools, CLS provides the following set of analytical tools:

1. School leaders are ‘powerful definers of the culture, organization and ethos of schooling’ (Grace, 2000, p. 232) and as such are key targets for policy regimes aiming to bring about changes to schooling. As such, there is a struggle over the definition of what constitutes the ‘good’ principal that involves a struggle over the subjectivity of principals. Some critical scholarship offers conceptual resources that help theorise the formation of new leadership subjectivities and these include ‘leadership habitus’ (Lingard et al., 2003), narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1991) and subjectivity (Foucault, 2005).
2. Understanding school leadership requires framing in a larger socio-political and cultural context. School leaders of late, under logics of neoliberalism (policies of devolution/local school management) are caught up in policies of choice and accountability and have adopted non-pedagogical orientations to leadership that often lead to alienation of principals from their staff (Bowe et al., 1992). Ball (2008) suggests that schools now operate in a neoliberalising policy regime characterised by three technologies: market mechanisms based on consumer ‘choice’, new steering-at-a-distance forms of public management and performativity. ‘Devolution’, or delegation of authority at the school level for decisions about resource allocation or school-based management, comes with ‘new audit and risk management procedures and new lines of accountability that delimit’ (Thomson, 2010, p. 9) what can be done at the local level. This tension is especially felt in public schools serving high-poverty communities.
3. Not only is leadership ‘a more complex, comprehensive and extensive concept than that of management’ (Grace, 2000, p. 236), but researching school leadership requires a distributive view of leadership and hence includes not only the principal, but teacher-leaders and students. Investigating educational leadership, as defined in this study, demands investigations into all those showing leadership in teaching and learning practices (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment).
4. CLS supports educational leadership by focusing on enabling and sustaining the core business of schools — namely, teaching and learning (Lingard et al., 2003). Hence, pedagogy is conceptualised as a core concern of educational leadership – not only classroom pedagogies, but the kinds of pedagogies exhibited by leaders that are associated with teachers’ professional learning. An example of such a perspective is what Hayes et al. (2004, p. 524) call ‘productive leadership’. Its features include hands-on knowledge about how educational theory translates into strategic action, and a focus on pedagogy and improving students’ learning outcomes.

### ***Key themes from critical leadership studies***

In the following we take up the key themes that are represented in the CLS literature, that of social justice, gender, race and culture, from the perspectives of scholars who identify with

these positions and speak from an insider view about the relations between these themes and critical leadership.

### *Social justice leadership*

When making the connection between social justice and transformative leadership, Shields (2017) locates the emergence of critical leadership studies and its concern with social justice with Burns' (1978) conviction that leaders need to move from transactional forms of leadership to practices that are transformative (the difference is discussed below). In a similar vein, Foster (1986) argues that if leadership is to be critically educative it needs to 'not only look at the conditions in which we live, but it must also decide how to change them' (p. 185). Even though Burns, Foster and the likes of Smyth (1989) were writing decades ago, there is still an ongoing struggle to distinguish conceptions of what makes a socially just education and what constitutes social justice.

Bogotch (2014) argues that social justice is an educational construct that means much more than 'what we currently call democratic schooling and community education' (p. 55). Given the contingent nature of injustices and how they are experienced within particular places and times, Bogotch (2014) takes the view that 'social justice ... is not one thing, one program, one policy, and one anything' (p. 56). If social justice is to be practised and experienced it exceeds the way predetermined measures of deficits and gap discourses are reified in empirical studies. Shields (2017) considers the term social justice a shifting signifier in which 'definitions and connotations vary widely and shift constantly contributing to the dislocation between educational leadership, social justice and reform agendas' (p. 323). In tracing the complex, frequently contradictory and relational aspects of social justice theories (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Gewirtz, 1998; Rawls, 1972, 2001; I. M. Young, 1997), North (2006) resists presenting a unified conceptualisation of social justice. Given the multiple and contested understandings of the social and cultural (Waite & Arar, 2020), concepts of social justice need to recognise that discourses are historically and politically situated within racialised, gendered and economically deprived experiences. In this sense, a visible and achievable social justice necessitates an open space where multiple normative claims about subjugated experiences are subject to dialogic negotiation and pathways to individual and collective practices of freedom.

As Shields (2017) notes, for the educational leader this means that context matters to the extent that the work of educational leaders may look different in a homogeneous and relatively wealthy community compared to a highly diverse and economically disadvantaged community. Shields goes on to distinguish between a socially just education as it has come to be applied in transactional (e.g., Leithwood, 1994, 1995; Leithwood et al., 2006) and transformative models of leadership. Shields characterises transactional leadership as being concerned with the functioning of an organisation, its stability and maintenance. Where change is deemed desirable, the leader may offer small concessions to features of an organisation, such as the timetable and aspects of policy that are directed at the behaviours of students and staff.

On the other hand, the transformational leader is reformist in their disposition and focuses on aligning vision, people and practices to goals of improvement. Here Shields likens the application of the term ‘socially just’ to educational leadership concerned with access to education and/or overcoming problems that prevent all students achieving the minimum standard determined by the test. She conceives social justice education as being concerned with promoting ‘a more complete understanding of the social (in)justice issues in the school, the community, and the world in which students live now and in which they will work as thoughtful, contributing adults’ (Shields, 2017, p. 329). This may involve the deployment of knowledge and skills that strengthen struggles against social inequality and exclusion, and the encouragement of ‘students’ active engagement with the social and political problems of their society so that they participate in the solutions of these problems’ (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2017, p. 383). In this instance, social justice education is concerned with working against the reproduction of iniquitous advantage and disadvantage by asking difficult questions about social, cultural, political and economic (in)justice. Where the school leader is to pursue social justice, this demands, as Zembylas and Iasonos (2017) suggest, the pursuit of a diverse and challenging learning environment that supports learning development, as well as maintaining high expectations for the entire student population.

In accepting the challenge of dealing with social, economic, educational and political injustice, Bogotch (2017) suggests that social justice work needs to be continuous, deliberate and responsive to, as well as validated by, the participants most affected. If the educational leader is to accept this moral imperative then, as Starratt (2017a) argues, this also requires a multi-perspective ethical practice where the evocation and experience of justice is tendered through the principles of care and critique. For Starratt (2017a) the ethics of care, justice and critique are complementary:

Justice without caring can be quite impersonal; care can be fruitless without justice; the acts of both caring and justice may be naïve without confronting through the ethic of critique the silent, structured injustice and the tacit power relations ingrained in the way schools are organized and administered. Conducting the general affairs of the schools guided by the ethic of care, justice, and critique corresponds to what I call the general ethics expected in all varieties of institutional life. (p. 77)

For Starratt, if the critical educational leader is to achieve social justice it requires a consideration of the affective life of the school and its community, a critical reading of the dominant discourses parading and circulating within the corridors of the school and its periphery, and an equitable distribution of resources.

Shields has calibrated such goals in a framework for social justice that attends to the mandate to effect deep and equitable change by attending to two areas: first, deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice, and second, practically focusing on emancipatory, democratic, equitable and justice-oriented approaches. In order to achieve these goals, Shields argues that leaders need to be engaged in redistributing

power in a way that places emphasis on public, private, individual and collective goods. To balance the needs of individuals and collectives, she emphasises the need to create communicative structures that enhance interdependence, interconnectedness and global awareness. Here the leader needs to be a critical reader of the school context. According to Shields, the leader needs to take a balanced view of competing demands within the school while providing opportunities for the production of hopeful narratives. At the same time the leader needs to be critically responsive to the performative demands of systems and the community and provide acts of moral courage when most needed. For Shields, engagement with these transformative practices enhances the possibility of social justice.

### *Feminist perspectives on leadership*

If an interest in a just education unites critical scholars, then one of the key themes that has motivated this work has been an interest in the role gender plays in schooling. Blackmore (2013) has argued that feminist theories have been appropriated and domesticated within mainstream leadership discourse. She argues that feminist perspectives have been depoliticised and decontextualised. To counter this, she calls for ‘refocusing the feminist gaze away from numerical representation of women in leadership to the social relations of gender and power locally, nationally and internationally’ (p. 139). Rather than viewing leadership from a masculinist lens, Blackmore advocates a feminist critical sociological perspective to ‘problematize the nature, purpose and capacities of educational systems and organizations to reform and indeed re-think their practices in more socially just ways’ (p. 139). Here, Blackmore draws on feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser to provide alternative perspectives on how leadership might productively engage in the redistribution of power and resources, the recognition of the historical processes of repression and disempowerment of minoritised people, and the representation of diverse cultures and values.

As we explain below, Blackmore’s (2013) work on feminist theories of leadership places significant emphasis on the role of emotion in the politics of educational policy and practice. In this work, Blackmore draws attention to the exploitation of emotion within the ‘economies of organizations and how these are gendered and racialized’ (p. 148). In developing these themes, Blackmore problematises the tension between cultural recognition and cultural practices which delimit opportunities in the wider society. Here she makes the point that ‘institutionalizing cultural difference through schooling can also exacerbate disadvantage of particular cultural/racial groups if they are concentrated in areas of high poverty’ (p. 149). This demands that leaders engage in the fairer redistribution of the ‘social, economic and political conditions that widen the opportunities and choices of all students and women leaders’ (p. 149) while taking account of the historical processes and practices of racialisation and gendering.

This brings into view feminist postcolonial perspectives that challenge leaders to engage in the situated and contested nature of knowledge ‘and the ontological position of white-Western leadership’ (Blackmore, 2013, p. 150). In Blackmore’s account, feminism can be understood as an analytical category or background of theoretical positions that disrupt the epistemological

underpinnings that produce the reductionist binaries embedded in twentieth-century Western social, philosophical, political and economic theory. For Blackmore, these ‘binaries of mind/body, rationality/emotionality, public/private, objective/subjective’ (p. 149) reduce and essentialise understandings of men/women. To further develop this work, she calls for a focus on:

the social relations of gender and how these are reproduced/produce and constituted within globalized school systems. The feminist gaze needs to refocus on the wider gender restructuring of the social, political and economic in ways that produce patterns of inequality that position women leaders and teachers in particular ways that limit or enable their leadership practices in specific contexts. (p. 149)

Latterly, Blackmore (2017) has taken up the implications of global rescaling of educational policy, restructuring, administration and research through neoliberalising policies. According to Blackmore, one of the transformative effects of neoliberalising policies has been the intensification of educational inequality and production of gendered, racialised, and class-based identities, practices and outcomes.

***Global capitalism, gendered leadership and the proliferation of injustice.*** In addressing the challenges presented by contemporary approaches to educational policy, research and leadership, Blackmore (2017) suggests that the field of education finds itself in a crucial historical moment. Blackmore builds on her previous analytical use of Fraser’s concepts of redistribution, recognition and representation to explore Fraser’s (2013, p. 3) contention that the world now lives in a post-socialist condition. In reading with Fraser, Blackmore (2017) suggests that this condition is characterised by a proliferation of struggles, the weakening of education as the site of emancipatory hope, and a ‘decoupling of the cultural politics of recognition from the social politics of redistribution, and a decentering of claims for equality in the face of aggressive marketization and sharply rising material inequality’ (p. 79). This brings into view Fraser’s (2009) concern that the feminist project has mainstreamed the ideals of gender equality but has yet to realise its ideals in practice.

While feminism has been instrumental in producing the grounds for a recognitive justice, the politics of redistribution has failed to materialise. Blackmore (2017) explores this dilemma by drawing attention to the marketisation of schools that emphasise individual and collective rights, which has led to an ‘increased polarization of educational achievement, even in affluent countries’ (p. 79). Here, the politics of choice becomes entangled with the interdependent struggles over racial, gendered, ethnic, sexual and disability justice. According to Blackmore’s (2017) reading of Fraser (2013), bivalent collectivities can present dilemmas in seeking social justice, as recognition of race or ethnicity can lead to gender inequality (misrecognition, maldistribution and misrepresentation due to historical male dominance), and vice versa.

Blackmore’s (2017) exploration of entrepreneurialism seeks to illustrate how the principle of recognition ‘jostles uncomfortably with the growing realization of the collective social costs of increasing educational and economic inequality that require redistributive justice or economic

redistribution’ (p. 80). The study highlights the effects of ‘growing divides between public and private education and between an increasingly casualized and feminized teaching profession and an emergent transnational executive class of educational entrepreneurs, policymakers, and consultants’ (p. 80). In response, Blackmore suggests that feminists and other social actors look beyond the Western framings of culture knowledge and start to ‘reinvent, our understandings of social justice and the feminist project of gender equity’ (p. 80).

### *Critical leadership and Indigenous education*

While critical leadership studies in Indigenous education are emerging across a range of international contexts, our purpose in this section is to foreground how these debates have been taken up in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, where they intersect most directly with the broader concerns of this literature review. We recognise that important work on culturally responsive leadership has been developed in other settler-colonial contexts (for example, in Canada and the United States), and we return to these later in this chapter in our discussion of diverse models of culturally responsive school leadership. Here, however, our focus is on how critical leadership scholarship has engaged with Indigenous education in the Australian context, particularly through Rigney’s theorisation of the Aboriginal child as knowledge producer, and then culturally nourishing schooling led by Lowe, and in Aotearoa New Zealand through the work of Berryman and Lawrence on Māori educational leadership. This approach enables us to consider how critical leadership studies are being re-worked within distinct Indigenous epistemologies and schooling traditions, before turning later in the chapter to a broader overview of related approaches to culturally responsive school leadership internationally.

***School leadership and Aboriginal Australian students: Rigney’s contribution.*** In response to persistent and well-documented disparities in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, school leadership must move beyond incremental fixes and adopt a transformative approach. Lester-Irabinna Rigney’s (2021, 2023c) theory of the Aboriginal child as knowledge producer offers a powerful reframing of Indigenous education that has implications for school leadership, moving beyond deficit-based approaches to centre Indigenist epistemologies. Rigney argues that Aboriginal children are not empty vessels to be filled with Eurocentric knowledge, but are instead active knowledge creators who bring rich cultural assets from their families and communities into the school environment. This perspective critiques the colonial ‘logic of the centre’, which has plagued school leadership. Colonial school leadership historically dismissed Indigenous knowledge as irrelevant, and instead Rigney places Aboriginal students’ lifeworlds, language and cultural talents at the heart of the learning process. For school leaders, this is a call to action not only to acknowledge but to actively privilege Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, forging a culturally responsive environment that validates students’ identities and harnesses their strengths for academic success.



The implications of Rigney's research for school leadership are profound and require a deep commitment to systemic and pedagogical change. Leaders must shift their focus from reactive measures that address underperformance to proactive, collaborative approaches that build upon the cultural capital of Aboriginal students. Rigney's work suggests that leaders must engage in a process of decolonisation, critically examining how their school's policies, curriculum and teaching practices perpetuate colonial logics. This means empowering staff through ongoing professional development to become culturally responsive educators who understand the importance of listening, responding to and affirming students' diverse ways of knowing. Leadership becomes a practice of creating a culturally safe and inclusive ecology of practices, where the school actively partners with the Aboriginal community to embed Indigenous knowledge and culture as a core part of its identity. A transformative school leader must drive the professional development of their staff, moving them from cultural awareness to genuine cultural responsiveness. This means challenging the biases and assumptions of all staff and ensuring they have the skills and knowledge to engage effectively with Aboriginal students and communities. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages are embedded across all learning areas, not just as isolated topics. This deep integration of Indigenous perspectives is crucial for validating students' identities and creating a truly inclusive learning environment that benefits all students.

To recognise the Aboriginal child as a knowledge producer, school leadership must shift its foundational mindset from Eurocentric dominance to a relational, culturally safe and collaborative approach. This involves more than just inclusive policies; it requires a systemic transformation of school culture, curriculum and leadership practices. A transformative school leader must drive the professional development of their staff, moving them from cultural awareness to genuine cultural responsiveness. This means challenging the biases and assumptions of all staff and ensuring they have the skills and knowledge to engage effectively with Aboriginal students and communities. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages are embedded across all learning areas, not just as isolated topics. This deep integration of Indigenous perspectives is crucial for validating students' identities and creating a truly inclusive learning environment that benefits all students.

Rigney's (2023c) research offers leaders and teachers nine system-level transformations to reframe and challenge existing power structures to drive change drawn from Stephen Ball (2003), Fredericks (2013), and Zembylas (2021, 2023a, 2023b):

1. Privilege respectful, reciprocal, relational, placed-based responsive pedagogy.
2. Develop repertoires of plurality practice to reorientate and reorganise systemic thinking beholden to a one-dimensional instructional core.
3. Cultivate solidarity with Aboriginal children so they can be Aboriginal and Australian.

4. Refuse reductive explanatory frameworks that reduce teacher subjectivities to docile, numbers-driven performativity.
5. Build belonging through teacher–student relationships towards multilingualism, identity and interculturality that allow students to fluently cross cultures, and local and global knowledges.
6. Shift from deficit views by reframing Aboriginal students as intelligent, competent producers of knowledge for themselves and their communities.
7. Refuse symbolic inclusion of difference in education (e.g., cultural celebration) masquerading as structural reform.
8. Cultivate solidarity with children who have the right to a quality education and to use their own language, culture and religion.
9. Improve learning through culturally responsive teaching that validates Aboriginal learners’ aspirations for both settler literacies as a plurality of knowledges while engaging in cultural maintenance of their own oral histories and languages before they are lost.

***School leadership and Aboriginal Australian students: Culturally nourishing school leadership.*** Building on Rigney’s theorisations, recent work within the *Culturally Nourishing Schooling* (CNS) project further extends critical approaches to leadership by exploring how schools can be re-imagined as places that sustain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ identities, languages, and relationships with Country and community (Amazan et al., 2024; Burgess, Fricker et al., 2023; Lowe, Skrebneva et al., 2021; Lowe, Weuffen et al., 2025). The CNS initiative builds on the findings of the *Aboriginal Voices* project, where extensive systematic reviews of the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education were conducted and community perspectives on what works in schools were documented (Burgess et al., 2022; Moodie et al., 2021; Trimmer & Dixon, 2023; Trimmer et al., 2021). Emerging from this foundation, the CNS project was initially implemented in partnership with Aboriginal scholars, teachers and communities across New South Wales and is now entering phase 2, which extends to schools in South Australia and Victoria.

The project conceptualises culturally nourishing school leadership as a relational, distributed and decolonial practice that decentres the principal as the sole leader and formalises co-leadership roles for Aboriginal cultural mentors, Elders and families (Golledge et al., 2025). Drawing on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014), the model theorises leadership as praxis – an ethical mode of action grounded in reciprocity and community co-governance rather than managerial control. Using the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014), the CNS framework identifies how leadership practices are enabled or constrained by the historical and structural legacies of colonisation and argues that transformation requires

leaders to re-work the ‘sayings, doings and relatings’ of school life to align with Indigenous ontologies of relationship and responsibility (Golledge et al., 2025, Lowe et al., 2024).

Complementing this theoretical work, O’Mara et al. (2024) demonstrate how strengths-based and culturally inclusive leadership can be enacted across diverse school systems. Their study of Catholic schools in Tasmania shows that leaders who work collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, redistribute leadership roles and negotiate curriculum content are more likely to create schools that become sites of decolonisation rather than assimilation. Such leadership recognises that success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students depends on schools’ willingness to embrace community knowledges, support distributed leadership structures and sustain long-term partnerships (O’Mara et al., 2024).

Together, this emerging Australian scholarship reframes Indigenous educational leadership around nourishment, reciprocity and co-agency. These developments resonate with parallel movements in Aotearoa New Zealand, where Māori scholars and educators have similarly advanced relational and decolonising approaches to school leadership.

***School leadership and Māori.*** In their recent study of the educational experiences and achievement of Māori students, Berryman and Lawrence (2017) observe that cycles of unemployment perpetuating low levels of health, housing and wellbeing, and high levels of ‘incarceration, poor health, and suicide’ (p. 335), are strongly influenced by the intergenerational impacts of the attempted erasure of language and culture. They draw attention to stark educational disparities between Māori and non-Māori, or Pākehā. This difference, according to Berryman and Lawrence, is perpetuated by ‘an on-going pathology of Māori underachievement that is reflected in, and reinforced by, the discourses of wider mainstream New Zealand society’ (p. 335).

In seeking to address the social justice imperatives associated with the inequitable distribution of wealth and wellbeing in New Zealand, Berryman and Lawrence (2017) highlight the need for school leaders to ‘understand the importance of decolonization and the dynamics of disparity’ (p. 335) if they are to become attuned to Māori students’ engagement with mainstream secondary schools. When setting out their agenda, they highlight the importance of overcoming the persistent and socially constructed disparities that exist between dominant and minoritised populations (Shields et al., 2005). Following Penetito (2010), the system needs to be less concerned with academic performance, and focus instead on addressing the ‘marginalization of Māori knowledge, history and custom’ (Berryman & Lawrence, 2017, p. 336) and turn towards and learn directly from minoritised communities (Sleeter, 2011a).

Drawing on critical theorists (such as Freire, 1968/1996, 2001; Gramsci, 1971; Shor & Freire, 1987), Berryman and Lawrence map the implications of the hidden curriculum ‘where generations of school children learn who counts and who does not and where they fit within this system’ (p. 337). From this they suggest that educators should

- engage in a process of re-conscientisation in order to avoid deficit discourses ‘and reposition themselves within discourses that realize their own agency to make a difference’ (p. 338)
- be active in the transformation of structures that fail to respond to the resources available within the sociocultural context of minoritised communities
- recognise and respect the diversity of students through developing emancipatory practices that establish the basis for a more equitable and collaborative learning relationship where the power to learn is open to everyone.

To address these concerns, Berryman and Lawrence stake out a claim for pedagogical policy and leadership initiatives that affirm Indigenous cultures by focusing on ‘sovereignty and self-determination, racism, and Indigenous epistemologies’ (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, as cited in Berryman & Lawrence, 2017, p. 337). In examining the work of leaders engaged in the successive phases of Te Kotahitanga (unity of purpose), they argue that disparities faced by Māori are not immutable. According to Berryman and Lawrence, the Te Kotahitanga program has sought to address Māori disadvantage perpetuated through education. It has aimed to listen to ‘the educational experiences of Māori students and those directly involved with their education’ (p. 343). Through a ‘process of theory-based, school-wide reform’ (p. 343) the intention is to disrupt ‘pervasive deficit beliefs about the attitude and ability of Māori students and the merit of traditional pedagogies and discourses which perpetuated epistemologies of learning as the acquisition of prescribed knowledge through top-down transmission practices’ (p. 343).

The study observed that, when leaders engaged in transforming their own assumptions and practices, Māori students’ underachievement was disrupted and changed in as little as three years. The study reinforced the merits of (a) pedagogical leadership, (b) priority being given to capacity building for school leadership and teachers, and (c) greater collaboration with governance across the community. Where principals found new clarity about the legitimacy of social and cultural self-determination, ‘they were able to engage in dialogue that led to transformative praxis towards social good and equity’ (p. 351).

For a timeline summarising the history of critical leadership studies, see Appendix C.

### ***Positioning critical leadership studies: Towards a praxis for critical leadership***

In summarising the key themes from CLS as outlined in this section, if the critical educational leader is to adequately address questions of justice, gender and culture, this requires:

- a consideration of how to care for the life of the school and its community
- a critical reading of the dominant discourses circulating within the corridors of the school and its periphery

- an equitable distribution of resources
- a multi-perspectival ethical practice of care, justice and critique (Starratt, 2017a)
- being deliberate and responsive
- being validated by the participants most affected (Bogotch, 2017).

Shields (2011) has calibrated these social justice goals in a framework that attends to the mandate to effect deep and equitable change by:

- deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice
- practically focusing on emancipatory, democratic, equitable and justice-oriented approaches
- engaging in redistributing power in a way that places emphasis on public, private, individual and collective goods
- balancing the needs of individuals and collectives, to create communicative structures that enhance interdependence, interconnectedness and global awareness
- being a critical reader of the context, while encouraging hopeful narratives
- responding to the performative demands of systems and community, through acts of moral courage when most needed.

School leaders are especially implicated, as the school is recognised as a key site of reform and of translation and enactment of policy (Hayes et al., 2017). When leaders engage with the transformative goals that have emerged from CLS, we see that it might be possible to enhance cultural, racial and gender equity in such a way that people experience justice.

The following sections provide brief readings of specific subfields related to educational leadership with a view to gleaning further insights about how to lead a culturally responsive school. We begin by reviewing what is often referred to as *educational leadership, management and administration* (ELMA).

### **Educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA)**

In the 1980s, educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) studies sought measurable links between leadership and organisational change. In the 1990s, ELMA research traced school effectiveness based on school effects, and in the 2000s the focus has turned to connecting school leadership with students' learning outcomes (Blackmore, 2013).

Among the essential critiques of ELMA research is the pursuit of *direct* (as opposed to indirect) links between school leadership and school performance. Blackmore (2013) argues that the concept of educational leadership is ‘discursively overworked and theoretically underdone’ (p. 140). She traces the numerous terms levelled at school leaders over the past few decades in ELMA research, all in the absence of acknowledgement of the theoretical paradigms they come from. Terms such as instructional, visionary, moral, entrepreneurial, collaborative, transformational, emotionally intelligent and distributive leaders to name a few are replete in the literature without distinct educational orientations. Lavié (2006) illustrates how the term ‘collaborative leader’, for instance, holds different meanings across varied educational paradigms:

1. In *cultural discourses* a ‘collaborative leader’ fosters interdependence and collective responsibility.
2. In *school effectiveness and improvement discourses* a ‘collaborative leader’ establishes and leads by example with contractual obligations for staff involvement.
3. In *critical discourses* a ‘collaborative leader’ integrates democratic practices, community participation and shared reflection.

These and other educational paradigms are not mutually exclusive, but they do provide nuance to how a particular aspect of educational leadership can hold different approaches (Blackmore, 2013).

School effectiveness and school improvement discourses reflected in ELMA approaches are rooted in factory model scientific management principles of the 1920s. At their core are commitments to standardisation, specialisation, synchronisation, concentration, maximisation and centralisation that inform the market principles of our current-day new public management. For schools today these commitments manifest through national and international school rankings (Landri, 2020, xi). The overemphasis on mainstream leadership practices disenfranchises leaders from leading *educationally*. The emphasis is on ‘gathering specific government-identified data through which they then self-govern to meet external targets ... educators become their own mechanisms for controlling and constraining education ... and the underlying assumptions that competition inevitably leads to improvement go largely unquestioned’ (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2018, p. 30). Courtney et al. (2018b) argue that the term “‘Educational Leader” is misleading because in reality most school principals are disconnected from teaching and learning. The more accurate title, they argue, would be ‘performative organisational leadership’ (p. 1).

Key national policy documents in the US (*No Child Left Behind*) and UK (*Every Child Matters*) are reflective of an ELMA belief in education as a ‘value-free science’. The push for large-scale quantitative studies, evidence-based practice and data-driven decision-making reflects false assumptions that broad generalisations (i.e., ‘what works’) about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment can be transferred across contexts. The human relations movement post–World

War II gave rise to the ‘therapeutic turn’ where emotional intelligence, interpersonal relations and intercultural understanding became popularised as core educational leadership skills. However, the focus became personalised approaches to learner support to overcome systemic barriers. The predominance of modern organisational theory and scientific management places an overemphasis on measurable standards that become standardised across contexts in the absence of awareness of situational complexity and distinction. It removes the relational aspects where leaders, educators, learners and parents are the core of a complex assemblage of learning ecologies where each co-participate in shaping aspirations (Landri, 2020, p. 34).

As opposed to ELMA, culturally responsive school leadership is informed by *critical leadership studies* (CLS) in education (Gunter, 2001). This was discussed in the previous section. See Appendix B for a table summarising the differences between mainstream leadership approaches (school effectiveness and improvement) and critical leadership studies.

## **School leadership and affect/emotion**

Studies of affect in the humanities and social sciences have burgeoned in the last two decades, in what has been dubbed the ‘affective turn’ (Clough, 2007; Zembylas, 2016). Such scholarship focuses attention on the role of affect in the shaping of social practices and, in educational studies, on how affect shapes practices in schools and classrooms and conversely how school practices shape affect (Dernikos et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2021). The ‘affective turn’ has developed innovative and productive concepts, bringing together psychoanalytically informed theories of subjectivity and subjection, theories of the body and embodiment, and political theories and critical analysis (Anderson, 2014). The ‘affective turn’ marks a shift in thought for education studies through an exploration of the complex interrelations of discursive practices, the human body, social and cultural forces, and individually experienced but historically situated affects and emotions.

Affect can be understood as discursive and material practices that constitute communal arrangements, capable of disrupting normative concepts and offering spaces for emergent thinking. School structures and cultures can be understood as ‘a medium that conditions what is felt and what can become the focused, intentional object of emotion[s]’ (Anderson, 2014, p. 110). An alternative way of thinking of this is that school cultures provide a ‘structure of feeling’ that mediates how capacities to affect and be affected emerge whilst also providing a collective mood that is shared between participants (Zembylas, 2002).

Drawing on theories of affect in education challenges conventional oppositions between the individual and the social, highlighting the complex relations among power, emotion, affect and subjectivity (Zembylas, 2020a, 2020b). This scholarship enables researchers to examine new questions: How is affect operating in schools? How do system and school policies constitute the affective encounters between teachers and students? How can CRS approaches transform

the affective environment of classrooms and the school? What are some of the transformations of affect in the pedagogical encounters when teachers adopt CRP approaches?

### ***Introduction to the field of school leadership and affect/emotion***

Empirical work over the last twenty years or so has indicated that emotions are powerful forces in school leaders' lives that warrant attention (Beatty, 2007a, 2007b; Beatty & Brew, 2004; Blackmore, 1996, 2004; Crawford, 2007; Hargreaves, 2004; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). There is growing evidence in the research literature that the affective world of school leaders is both complex and intense (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; James et al., 2019; McKay et al., 2025; Samier & Schmidt, 2009). School leaders are confronted on a daily basis with a variety of emotions that are inextricably linked to personal, professional, relational, political and cultural issues (Zembylas, 2010).

School leaders' emotional struggles have significant implications for their decision-making, wellbeing and overall leadership style. For instance, there is research that shows that school leaders (especially women) are constantly engaged in emotion management processes, often with serious implications not only for their emotional health but also for their professional effectiveness (Blackmore, 1996, 2004; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998); at the same time, however, research also documents how mechanisms of emotion management help school leaders promote their own agenda, survive the high emotional demands of school leadership, and bring meaningful changes to their school (Beatty & Brew, 2004). School leaders' handling of the emotions in their own reflective practices and in their relationships with parents, students and faculty shape and reflect the climate and culture of their schools (Beatty, 2007a, 2007b).

Initial research on affect/emotion and school leadership has treated emotion as little more than psychological and cognitive forces that distract from rational processes (Beatty, 2005). Even Beatty's (2000, 2007a, 2007b; Beatty & Brew, 2004) groundbreaking social and organisational analysis of emotions in educational leadership through a social constructionist lens makes the problematic assumption that organisations are either constructed or pre-given (Zorn & Boler, 2007). However, more recent work, especially in the aftermath of the so-called 'affective turn', recognises emotions and affects as part of everyday social, cultural and political life and has made significant theoretical contributions in defining affect, emotion, feeling and mood in school leadership literature (James et al., 2019). Emotions in leadership, therefore, are not only a psychological matter for individuals but also a socio-political space in which school leaders, teachers, students and parents interact, with implications for larger political and cultural struggles for change (Zembylas, 2018).

The objective of this brief review is to identify the most prominent themes in the study of emotions and affect in school leadership in recent years. Our goal is not to provide a comprehensive review of this vast and continuously growing area of research, but rather to identify major themes in this research field as well as to highlight some gaps for future research. We therefore provide a 'representative' overview focusing on topics and issues that have



emerged as important in the course of our work over the years, particularly that of Michalinos Zembylas, or have been recognised as such by other authors in the area of affect/emotion and school leadership (see, e.g., Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; McKay et al., 2025). Also, the themes we identify and the examples we choose to enliven them are to be read as illustrations that address the broad key topics, rather than as ‘exemplary’ or ‘best’ examples.

Our review of work on school leadership and affect/emotion has led to the following three main thematic areas: (a) race and social justice; (b) emotional labour and gender; and (c) policy and school reform. These themes are briefly presented below with some examples illustrating research in each of the themes.

### ***Race and social justice***

The first theme is how issues of race and social justice affect the work of school leaders. What becomes obvious from this research is that there is still little work in this area, particularly work that focuses explicitly on culturally responsible schools. Although early research in the field of affect/emotion and school leadership shows the intersection between emotion, race or social justice, and school leadership, more recent research has not paid enough attention to this entanglement.

Blackmore (2010) was one of the first researchers in education to highlight that leadership is an emotional practice and ‘leaders are gendered and racialised, in socially diverse schools and societies’ (p. 642). Therefore, ‘preparing leaders to work with emotions in culturally diverse educational communities’ (p. 642) is crucial. Blackmore’s analysis ‘is context specific, largely drawing on Australian data with reference to indigeneity’ (p. 642); however, her work ‘identifies possible strategies that could be undertaken in professional learning forums that address issues of difference’ (p. 642) and cultural diversity more broadly. For example, she explores how pedagogies of discomfort could be used ‘for learning about leadership from a perspective of the politics of difference’ (p. 651).

Zembylas (2010) examines

the potential implications for leadership preparation programs of the intersection between emotions and leadership for social justice ... The methodology followed was grounded in an ethnographic case study of a Greek-Cypriot principal who struggled to transform his elementary school into a community that truly included students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds ... The findings of the case study highlight: the vision and practices of leadership for social justice; the ambivalent emotions of social justice leadership; and strategies for coping with the personal and structural dimensions of social justice leadership ... The practical implications are discussed in relation to the emotional knowledge and skills that are needed for preparing social justice leaders to navigate emotionally through existing school structures and to cultivate critical emotional reflexivity about the changes that are needed to school discourses and practices so that justice and equity are placed at the centre of school leadership. (p. 611)

Jansen (2009) explores the work of leaders who promote social justice against the grain of public expectations. He uses a biographical approach with two white South African principals who consciously and deliberately transformed their white schools into racially diverse communities of teachers, learners and parents. Jansen describes the challenges as well as the ways in which these school principals led their lives and their schools, what motivated their decisions to defy the dominant trends, how they balanced competing pressures and tensions, and the consequences of their behaviours. Jansen's analysis highlights the need to rethink the relationship between race, school leadership and affect/emotion, because it seems that the identity of the school leader matters not only in the ways in which leadership practice is conducted, but also in the ways in which such leadership is 'read' by racially diverse communities.

More recent scholarship has addressed the role of emotions in social justice leadership in schools. For example, Murray-Johnson and Guerra (2018) show the emotional challenges of principals in their struggles to enact social justice leadership in schools, especially the widespread deficit thinking on their campuses. Their efforts to offer workshops on culturally responsive classrooms were met with emotional reactions from their staff members. This article has been particularly helpful for our own research because it includes discussion questions and class activities which we have used in our own workshops with principals. Also, Radd and Grosland (2019) reiterate the important role of emotions in understanding how white supremacy is entrenched and provide recommendations for school leaders and scholars concerned with social justice leadership in urban environments.

### ***Emotional labour and gender***

Another line of research focuses on the emotional demands placed upon school leaders and the emotional labour of school leadership. The implications of emotional labour for school leadership are one of the earliest areas of research that developed in the field of affect/emotion and school leadership. This research has shown consistently the expectations that school leaders will perform emotional labour to manage their emotions in schools. This research has also shown that school leaders' emotional work can be affected by multiple factors, including gender and race.

Early research in this area indicated that women leaders in primary and secondary schools, especially in times of change and restructure, have to manage their emotions – particularly in relation to dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity being held by peers, teachers, students and the local communities (see Blackmore, 1996; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Blackmore's work shows that the emotions of women working in leadership positions are regulated by emotional rules that are implicit within the organisational ethos of the education system and the school itself. This work suggests that it is crucial to understand how women are negotiating the emotional terrain that is a consequence of change in their schools.

Another study shows that, although dominant constructions of masculinity seem to align with traditional forms of leadership, not all men conform to such constructions of masculinity; these pressures of leadership create certain emotional demands for men (Gill & Arnold, 2015). Whereas once the male principal was endowed with an authoritative position to some degree distant from the students, teachers and parents, the situation today is more complicated, as Gill and Arnold (2015) point out. Their study reveals a sense of fragility about the identity of male school principals as they seek to discover how to conduct themselves in an environment that is constantly changing as traditional norms of masculine leadership seem to erode.

Maxwell and Riley (2017) explore the emotional labour involved in the work of educational leaders interacting with key stakeholders, an area in which there has been little research. The authors examine emotional demands placed on leaders, the types and intensities of emotional labour and the impacts of various emotional labour strategies. They collected data using an online survey to which 1320 school principals in Australia responded. The findings of the study show the proportions of surface acting and deep acting used by principals and their relationship to job satisfaction. The study also shows the facets of emotional labour in educational leadership and suggests that interventions should be developed to reduce high levels of burnout by educational leaders. Yamamoto et al. (2014) suggest that having school principals analyse significant emotional events retrospectively would help them not only understand the impact of their leadership but also deal with the emotional labour demanded in their leadership position.

Oplatka (2017) examines the ways by which Israeli school principals manage their emotions at work, focusing in particular on how they tend to express empathy towards others in the school. The study found that school principals display three components of empathy: cognitive, affective (e.g., compassion), and behavioural (e.g., caring), while consciously inhibiting the expression of anger and fear publicly. The regulation of empathy and related emotions has implications for how school leaders perform emotional labour. In general, emotional display and suppression among school leaders seems to be associated with several social and cultural factors (Arar & Oplatka, 2018).

McKay and Mills (2023) examine the emotional work involved in leading schools in marginalised communities through case studies of Australian and English government school principals. The study is theorised through Lynch's framework of affective justice (love, care and solidarity) and shows how school leaders demonstrate love, care and solidarity while working towards social justice. In exploring the affective work of school leaders, McKay and Mills emphasise that there are various strategies through which principals can be empowered to continue to undertake their solidarity and care work while mitigating the impact of emotional labour; these strategies are vital for the school leaders' wellbeing.

Recent literature also explores further how gender intersects with other factors such as race to affect women leaders' performances of emotional labour (Ispa-Landa & Thomas, 2019). In particular, Ispa-Landa and Thomas (2019) interviewed white women and women of colour

principals and asked about their leadership style and emotional labour. White women reported that they began their principalship wanting to establish themselves as emotionally supportive leaders who were open to others' influence. They viewed emotional labour as existing in tension with showing authority as a leader. Over time, however, most white women reported adopting more directive practices. By contrast, women of colour reported beginning their principalship with a more directive, take-charge leadership style. They viewed emotional labour and authority as part of a blended project and did not talk about these two aspects of leadership as existing in tension. These leadership styles changed very little over time. Although the results cannot be generalised, they have important implications for how race and gender intersect in professional women's emotional labour.

### ***Policy and school reform***

Finally, there is a line of research that has to do with policy and school reform and their affective impact on educational leadership. School leaders often find themselves immersed in emotionally charged policy debates and politics (e.g., racial equity, desegregation policy, culturally responsive schooling, school reform efforts). Hence, it is crucial to explore how school leaders deal with these challenges, while taking into consideration their emotional wellbeing.

Staunæs (2011) was one of the first researchers who used 'affect theory' (rather than the term 'emotion' and constructivist theories of emotion) to explore how educational leadership is becoming increasingly affective. Her analysis draws upon the notion of governmentality and the 'affective turn', and highlights affective educational leadership technologies as they appear in contemporary leadership handbooks in Denmark. In particular, Staunæs argues that there are four major technologies that tend to maintain the status quo in schools: (1) School becomes the managed core of society, which reshapes educational leadership as onto-power, which means governing (e.g., school leaders, teachers, students) through ideas and materialities of perception and neurons. (2) Affectivity becomes synonymous with positive feelings, while more indeterminate parts of affectivity are neglected. (3) Educational leadership becomes a matter of governing the future through simulation and imagination. (4) Affective leadership is energised by a temporally and spatially structured bio-morality.

Mills and Niesche (2014) present a case study of the emotional demands upon one principal as she undertook a program of reform at her school. This case study shows how this principal's emotional work was constructed within the political context of school (e.g., struggles to resist normalisation into how to be a school principal). This article makes an important contribution in understanding the ways that women leaders are negotiating the emotional terrain of enacting change and reform in their schools.

Zembylas (2018) takes on the hotly debated issue of professional standards for teachers and school leaders and argues that political debates about standards create ambivalent (i.e., both positive and negative) affective spaces and atmospheres in schools that require one to look for

the ways in which biopower works affectively through specific technologies. This ambivalence produces not only governable and self-managed teachers and school leaders who simply implement professional standards, but also affective spaces and atmospheres that might subvert the normalising effects (and affects) of standards. The contribution of this analysis, which builds on Staunæs's (2011) work, is to interrogate the affective conditions in standardising processes taking place in schools, and outline some implications for school leadership.

Brennan and Mac Ruairc's (2019) study explores the perspectives of leaders working in schools in some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities in Ireland. In particular, the study examines the extent to which the socio-economic context of the school impacts the emotional quality of the interactions of school principals. According to Brennan and Mac Ruairc, principals' personal and professional values shape how they respond to the socio-economic and local context of the school and how the social relations and activities of schools are influenced by the emotional capital brought into or created in the schools.

Finally, in a theoretical paper, Grosland and Roberts (2021) discuss how educational leadership scholarship on emotions takes up issues of policy debates and political subjects, and outline the implications and recommendations for educational leadership. School leaders engage in emotionally charged policy issues in their interactions with school boards, media and community members, and such interactions are stressful and contribute to leadership burnout, especially among critical educational leaders. As such, educational leadership, according to Grosland and Roberts, needs to address not only the emotionality of their practice but the emotions that result from the interactions they regularly encounter in their practice about societal political subjects and policy debates. This can be done in a variety of ways (e.g., political theatre, asking questions about emotions). The authors suggest that scholarship within educational leadership needs to address how emotions interact with the societal political subjects that permeate leadership.

## **Leading the culturally responsive school**

Our working definition of culturally responsive schooling (CRS) in this literature review draws on Castagno and Brayboy's (2008, p. 942) idea of 'responsive structures' and Richard Elmore's (2000, 2002, 2003, 2005) conception of 'school organization and instruction practice'. For us, good culturally responsive leadership is *leadership that applies to the whole of site – a responsive structural reform designed to support and sustain collaborative practitioner inquiry and professional learning for practice change connected to the cultural and linguistic prior knowledges of students and their communities. It involves deliberate and intentional strategic planning, underpinned by evidence-based research, to build the supports needed to improve learning outcomes and advance social justice across the school.*

Isolated culturally responsive classroom practices are unlikely to sustain new strategies without leadership and responsive structural reform. Individualised teacher culturally responsive

practices alone are insufficient to shift underachievement in schooling for Aboriginal and minoritised learners. The message for leaders and teachers whose responsibility it is to transform school to meet the needs of all students is to put in place support systems for teachers to help them learn and sustain responsive classroom practices and relationships.

Culturally responsive schools build ecologies of practices to address administrative, curriculum and dominant pedagogical bias, teacher preparation, school culture and history, and community need. Responsive leaders acknowledge students' resistance to structures and institutionalised practices that are hostile to their cultural and linguistic identities. These colonising experiences of discomfort, alienation and distrust can arise from hegemonic deficit views. Transforming the school away from monocultural structures and practices that negate students' diverse cultural assets for learning is necessary to identify quality processes associated with culturally responsive curriculum, assessment and school intervention.

Gay (2010) and other scholars (e.g., Khalifa et al., 2016) draw a distinction between teaching and leadership by highlighting that teaching requires consistent systemic in-school research-based structures to support teachers learning how to embed culturally responsive practices in their classrooms. The important message to leaders and teachers is that culturally responsive schools and their leadership in goal setting, strategic planning and resourcing are necessary to ensure ownership, sustainability and spread of culturally responsive practices in their schools. Strong and determined culturally responsive school leaders succeed in changing practice to ensure equity, with a firm commitment to responsive structural reform without diluting or abandoning culturally responsive pedagogy. A culturally responsive teacher requires a culturally responsive leader, school system, policy and school community. Responsive leaders have in common skills to plan, resource and evaluate the impact of their reforms, and are bold and deeply committed in their belief in education equality and social justice.

By way of an overview of the culturally responsive school leadership literature, this section provides a brief account of the broad contours of various approaches to leading schools with a view to working with cultural difference as a learning asset for teachers and students. There are various cousins, so to speak, that provide insights for school leaders whose school community is defined by significant cultural difference. Each of them is a response to a very specific community context and a key characteristic of each of these approaches is this careful contextualising. None of these approaches claim any universal truth but, given the careful empirical work, each of them offer accounts of school communities working on making schooling more culturally inclusive, and hence unsettling the normalising and naturalising of a dominant culture in the way schooling is practised, especially in curriculum and pedagogy. The cousins we review start with international examples and then move to Australian approaches: culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa); the Kaupapa Māori model of school leadership; culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth (Castagno and Brayboy); leadership for culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings); Alaskan culturally responsive school leadership; leadership for culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris); leading a culturally nourishing school (Lowe); red dirt leadership (Osborne); culturally responsive leadership in

remote Indigenous schools (Corrie); and the version created by the authors of this review: Australian culturally responsive schooling (Rigney).

### ***Culturally responsive school leadership***

Khalifa et al. (2016) undertake an extensive review of the culturally responsive school leadership literature to advise school leadership of four major behavioural themes:

- *Critical self-awareness:* Leaders are called to engage in critical self-reflection about their own biases, values and assumptions regarding race, culture and their impact on leadership practice.
- *Development of culturally responsive teachers:* Leaders are expected to take responsibility for developing culturally responsive teachers through professional development, mentoring, modelling, and ensuring culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy throughout the school.
- *Promotion of an inclusive school environment:* Leaders should work to promote inclusive school environments by challenging exclusionary practices, validating Indigenous student identities and leveraging resources to create culturally affirming contexts.
- *Engaging students, parents and Indigenous context:* Leaders need to authentically engage students, parents and communities by creating overlapping school–community spaces, honouring First Nations’ languages and cultural practices, and advocating for community-based causes.

The clear message for school leaders and teachers is that building a responsive infrastructure to prepare teachers to leverage and link to the curriculum the prior knowledges, skills and talents of minoritised learners requires culturally responsive school environments. This will enable the transfer of teachers’ skills and knowledge necessary to integrate students’ cultures. Khalifa (2018) argues that school principal preparation and training programs are deeply undertheorised in the CRS literature. He also highlights the importance of CRS equity audits, which, when implemented, enable schools to adopt a more data-driven CRS approach. However, most states and local districts currently do not require such data collection.

### ***The Kaupapa Māori model***

The Kaupapa Māori model for leading a culturally responsive school is not a single, prescriptive approach but a framework built on core Māori principles. It emphasises Māori self-determination, collective wellbeing and cultural identity to fundamentally transform and challenge the mainstream education system. A culturally responsive school led by Kaupapa Māori moves beyond surface-level cultural inclusion to fully incorporate Māori language, knowledge and cultural practices into every aspect of school life (see R. Bishop & Glynn, 1999;

Hiha, 2016; Hoskins & Jones, 2017; G. H. Smith, 2003, 2017; L. T. Smith, 2015). R. Bishop (2023) offers his GPILSEO model to leaders who seek to drive structural reform as well as offering capability supports to develop effective teachers who can meet the needs of Māori wellbeing, culture, learning and families through the systemic spread of culturally responsive pedagogies across the site:

- *Goals:* Leaders must establish clear, SMART objectives focused on equity, excellence and cultural sustainability for Māori and other marginalised students.
- *Pedagogy:* Schools must implement a common code of practice known as North-East Relational Based Pedagogy that honours Māori culture, language and identity while building family-like classroom relationships.
- *Infrastructure:* Leaders must develop and maintain supportive structures and in-school support systems that ensure culturally responsive pedagogy is implemented with fidelity and sustained over time.
- *Leadership:* Leadership skills and responsibilities must be distributed across the school to enhance governance and ensure all stakeholders take ownership of the reform rather than leaving it to designated facilitators alone.
- *Spread:* The reform must involve and engage all stakeholders across the school community, including teachers, school leaders, students, whānau (families) and the wider community.
- *Evidence:* Schools must create and maintain systems to collect and utilise data for evidence-based decision-making and problem solving that monitors progress towards equity goals.
- *Ownership:* Collective ownership must be promoted through careful planning, resourcing and self-review processes that ensure teaching and school-wide leadership practices support the reform as intended over time.

According to Bishop, the school structure led by responsive leaders using this conceptual framework engages with teachers to ensure pedagogic practices continue to be implemented sustainably. This develops teacher–student relationships through improving the organisation’s capacity to affirm community expertise and aspirations.

### ***Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth***

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) have theorised over the years an ethic of culturally responsive school actions that is distinct from discourses of mere inclusion. Castagno and Brayboy’s (2008) model of CRS provides helpful guidance for leaders’ and teachers’ knowledge and training if ‘schools hope to provide CRS to Indigenous youth’ (p. 981). These researchers argue that developing systems for inclusive curriculum is not enough, as CRS requires



‘contextualising or localizing curriculum, pedagogy so that it bears connection and resemblance to the epistemic knowledges and learning of local communities’ (p. 981). Community leaders also have an important role in adding value to schools systems, teachers’ professional development and students’ learning. Such practices will help to ensure educators’ practice shifts away from the essentialisation of students’ learner identities. Critical to the culturally responsive school is the capacity to build the agency and self-determination of the Indigenous learner. School systemic support for transformation of teachers’ practice must focus on:

- *Local tribal<sup>7</sup> sovereignty and self-determination:* Tribal nations have inherent rights as sovereign political entities to determine the nature of schooling provided to their youth, representing a government-to-government relationship that demands education serve not just individual empowerment but the empowerment of families, tribes, nations and peoples.
- *Anti-racist action:* Educators must explicitly acknowledge and actively address the pervasive racism Indigenous youth experience in schools – including paternalism, low expectations, stereotypes, biased curricula and a culture of whiteness – rather than using euphemisms that portray Native students as having problems instead of recognising that educators and the system are the real problem.
- *Indigenous epistemologies of Native students and tribal communities:* Indigenous knowledge systems comprise complex technologies and worldviews based on holistic understanding, relationality, community responsibility, rootedness in place and the appropriate use of knowledge. These epistemologies must inform pedagogy, curricula and educational policies.

### ***Leadership for culturally relevant pedagogy***

Gloria Ladson-Billings’ *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP) approach argues that school leadership is essential for creating the systemic conditions for CRP to thrive. For Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995a, 1995b), culturally relevant leadership is not an optional program but a foundational framing for a whole-of-school transformation and especially an entire school culture. To enact the principles of CRP productively, school leaders can focus on several key practices, which are drawn from and expand upon Ladson-Billings’ work:

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<sup>7</sup> The terms ‘tribal’ and ‘Native’ are commonly used in the North American context in which ‘tribal nations’, ‘tribal governance’, ‘Native nations’ and ‘Native education’ are established political and legal categories grounded in the sovereign status of Indigenous nations. Within this context, these terms signal nationhood, collective authority and self-determination. We acknowledge that neither term is appropriate in Australia, where First Nations peoples do not identify as ‘tribes’ or ‘Natives’, and where different cultural, political and historical frameworks apply.

- *Focus on the community, not the deficit:* Shift the focus from what is ‘wrong’ with black students and other students of colour to recognise instead the cultural strengths and assets that students and their families bring to school.
- *Promote a strong version of community engagement:* Leaders move beyond performative outreach to build deep, respectful and reciprocal relationships with families and community members.
- *Cultivate a critical consciousness among staff:* School leaders provide professional development for sustaining culturally responsive teaching practices that help teaching staff to recognise how educational systems and curriculum can marginalise students.
- *Foster inclusive school environments:* School leaders create a safe and welcoming climate where all students feel respected, valued and connected.
- *Amplify student voice:* Leaders actively empower students by involving them in decision-making processes and honouring their lived experiences.

### ***Alaska Native knowledge leadership***

The Alaskan model for culturally responsive schooling (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1998) provides a set of educational resources developed by the Alaska Native community. The model emphasises framing schooling policy and practice with Indigenous knowledge, languages and cultural values, with a strong focus on community and Elder involvement. Specifically for school leaders, the Alaskan model provides a guide for implementing a culturally responsive school. Key actions for leaders include:

- *Adopting the standards:* School boards and administrators use the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools as a formal guide for all educational policy and practice.
- *Involving Elders and community:* Leaders are responsible for creating formal structures, such as Elders-in-residence programs, that integrate community wisdom and traditional knowledge into the educational system.
- *Decentralising authority:* The model promotes local decision-making and empowers local school/community committees to guide policies and practices.
- *Cultivating local staff:* Leaders are encouraged to hire local candidates and build a ‘grow your own’ program to ensure continuity and cultural insight within school staff.
- *Mentoring and training:* Administrators facilitate cultural orientation camps and mentoring programs for new staff to help them adjust to the community’s cultural expectations.

- *Adjusting the school calendar:* Leaders are encouraged to adapt the school schedule to accommodate and support significant local cultural activities and events.
- *Supporting place-based education:* Administrators encourage and support educational activities that take place outside the classroom and use the natural environment as a learning resource.

### ***Leadership for culturally sustaining pedagogy***

Django Paris's model (Alim & Paris, 2017; Paris 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017) for leading a culturally sustaining school centres on culturally sustaining pedagogy, a framework he introduced in 2012. Emerging from a 'loving critique' of earlier work, the shift in language from 'culturally responsive' to 'culturally sustaining' indicates a move from the goal of just being relevant to actively perpetuating and revitalising the languages and cultures of students of colour. A school guided by Paris's model would operate on several key principles:

- *Assets-based perspective:* Instead of viewing students' cultural backgrounds as deficits to be overcome, leaders treat them as assets to be nurtured. This includes leveraging the cultural knowledge, abilities and networks that marginalised students and families bring to the school.
- *Active linguistic and cultural pluralism:* School leaders foster an environment where students' diverse languages, dialects and cultural practices are not just included but actively supported.
- *Collaboration with the community:* Decision-making should be a collaborative process that centres the voices and experiences of historically marginalised families.
- *Embracing youth culture:* The model recognises that youth cultures are dynamic and evolving. Leaders must embrace and critically engage with this culture's potential to challenge oppressive systems, while also being mindful of how it might reproduce inequalities.
- *High expectations and rigorous instruction:* A culturally sustaining leader sets and monitors high academic standards for all students, regardless of background.
- *Critical examination of power structures:* Teachers and students in a culturally sustaining school are encouraged to develop a critical consciousness, including analysing power structures and making connections between their learning and real-world issues.

### ***Leading a culturally nourishing school***

Kevin Lowe and colleagues have been developing an approach for leading culturally nourishing schooling (<https://www.culturallynourishingschooling.org.au/>; Burgess, Bishop et al., 2022; Golledge et al., 2025; Lowe, Skrebneva et al., 2021; Lowe et al., 2024; Trimmer & Dixon, 2023; Trimmer et al., 2021). The model is specifically designed to work closely with local First Nations communities to improve schooling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia and foster strong cultural identities. The model is a research-informed framework based on extensive reviews of the literature conducted in the *Aboriginal Voices* project (<https://www.culturallynourishingschooling.org.au/aboriginal-voices-project>). The four pillars of culturally nourishing schooling are:

- *Learning on and with Country*: This pillar emphasises the importance of a pedagogy of place. It involves educators and students engaging with local knowledges, relationships and ethical commitments to place, learned from Elders and community members through on-Country immersion experiences.
- *Cultural inclusion*: This involves the authentic inclusion of Indigenous cultural practices, histories and languages within the school's curriculum and daily operations. School leaders and teachers work with local community members to build stronger relationships and co-create an inclusive learning environment.
- *Cultural mentoring*: A key component of the model, this involves employing local community members and Elders as cultural mentors. Mentors work collaboratively with teachers on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to provide an authentic community voice in all aspects of schooling.
- *Professional change in teaching*: This pillar is achieved through teacher-led inquiry and collaborative professional learning conversations. Teachers engage in deep reflection on their own worldviews and teaching practices, critically examining how they can better support Indigenous students.

### ***Red dirt leadership***

Red dirt thinking offers a way of conceptualising remote Indigenous education, particularly for Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara) communities in the Western Desert region of South Australia's remote north-west and across state borders into Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Red dirt thinking positions remote contexts as unique and challenges deficit narratives that cast remote schooling as 'failing'. It holds the utopian (blue sky) in one hand while grasping the pragmatic and place-based (red dirt) in the other. Fundamental to red dirt leadership is:

- *Building learning on a strong foundation*: Leaders recognise and build upon existing foundations – the assets of the child's family, language, culture, community and land –

rather than reproducing models as a cloudy mirror of metropolitan schooling that can leave children feeling uncertain and disconnected.

- *Leading an affective environment for ‘sticky’ knowledge:* Leaders create conditions where a relational pedagogical frame can build the child’s confidence through ‘the “close voices” of family and community’ (p. 26) and ‘open the spirit’ (p. 23) of children so (new) knowledge ‘sticks’ (p. 27) (Katrina Tjitayi in Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014).
- *Rethinking ‘Closing the Gap’:* Leaders create space for family to surround and affirm the child in their schooling, recognising that family is the central foundation for building students’ identity, confidence and aspiration.
- *Teach what is relevant:* Leaders ensure education is grounded in identity and belonging, kinship and family connection, Australian policy and the history of the land rights movement, and Tjukurpa/Wapar,<sup>8</sup> making learning relevant to children’s lived community experiences.
- *Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara language immersion:* A school driven by community, run by Anangu, teaching Anangu languages and teaching through Anangu languages is foundational for all subjects.
- *Turning the economic participation paradigm on its head:* Leaders must prepare students for the world outside the school gates. This means including education for the board room and political engagement, as examples beyond entry-level workplace models. This approach reconceptualises power relations and is responsive to the question: ‘What is an Anangu education for?’
- *Red dirt curriculum:* Leaders synergise Indigenous and dominant knowledges, teaching in concentric circles, working from local to global, including Anangu histories, ‘red dirt’ legal studies, economics, cultural studies and ecological knowledge.
- *Both ways as an alternative structure:* Leadership requires working the middle space between institutions, schools and communities, ensuring Anangu voices, leaders and educators, and aspirations remain central to Anangu education (Burton & Osborne, 2014; Guenther & Osborne, 2018; Guenther et al., 2014, 2016; Lester et al., 2013; Minutjukur & Osborne, 2014; Minutjukur et al., 2014; Osborne, 2014; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Osborne et al., 2019, 2020, 2023; Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014).

Leaders in Anangu schools find themselves ‘caught in the middle’ between community expectations and upward accountability to government departments (Guenther & Osborne, 2018; Guenther et al., 2024). Non-local leaders are pushed to prioritise systemic concerns – employment strategies, policy contexts, workforce development – while remote Aboriginal leaders and community members prioritise the purpose of education (language, land, culture,

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<sup>8</sup> Tjukurpa/Wapar is Law/lore and creation histories.

identity) and how success is defined (parent and community involvement), creating largely mutually exclusive priorities.

### ***Culturally responsive leadership in remote Indigenous schools***

Drawing on red dirt thinking and Khalifa's work, Corrie (2021) is concerned about school principal leadership preparation and training programs especially in remote areas. In an Australian study into remote culturally responsive school leadership, Corrie (2021) suggests a set of structural actions for leaders in remote schools with high numbers of Aboriginal students:

- *Co-construct school policy with all educational stakeholders:* Leaders must move away from monological, monocultural practice that adheres only to Western worldviews and instead engage in dialogic co-construction of educational policy where all parties – including local Indigenous communities – have collaborative agency to engineer socially just reform pathways through power-sensitive relationships that recognise expertise comes in multiple forms.
- *Privilege place-based languages, cultures and pedagogical approaches:* Leaders must honour and incorporate local Indigenous languages, cultures and pedagogies as assets that provide students with opportunities to learn according to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, maintain traditional knowledges, develop strong identity formation and ensure school is not regarded as a foreign place.
- *Develop culturally responsive teachers:* Leaders must reject deficit views and commit to ongoing development of staff through courageous conversations, professional learning facilitated through culture rather than just about culture, and collaborative practices such as joint lesson planning between local and non-local staff that centre students' specific lifeworlds and cultural capital as important assets.
- *Connect community engagement to relational and educational purposes:* Leaders must move beyond informal school celebrations to establish formalised advisory structures like school councils that give the local community direct ways to impact the educational direction of the school, ensuring engagement serves educative purposes rather than positioning community participation as non-essential or disconnected.

Data collected throughout this study highlighted that culturally responsive remote school leadership positions school principals as providing a relational bridge between the government department, school and the local community.

### ***Towards an Australian culturally responsive school***

Based on the work of Lester-Irabinna Rigney and Robert Hattam, the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* project (<https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au/>) has been developed through various funded studies and began with an Australian Research Council-funded Indigenous

Discovery project titled *Towards an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy*. The original rationale for this study was the need for a new way of thinking about improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students in Australia. The project was based on the premise that decades of policy work had failed and that, looking across the Pacific-rim settler-colonial countries, there was a hopeful research base for culturally responsive approaches. This quotation comes from the original research proposal:

Yet globally there is growing body of evidence that culturally responsive pedagogies do improve academic success for First Nations peoples (Castagno & Brayboy 2008). Culturally responsive pedagogies for Indigenous students are now accepted as a hopeful strategy for improving academic achievement of First Peoples in settler colonial countries such as the USA, Canada, and New Zealand (Castagno & Brayboy 2008; Dick, Estell, & McCarty, 1994; Bishop et al., 2007; Smith 2003). By way of a working definition, culturally responsive pedagogy ‘emphasises and respects students’ identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for optimal learning’ (Klump & McNair, 2005, p. 3).

Then, in the first year of the project, the participating teachers reported that their classrooms were becoming superdiverse and it was not uncommon for their classrooms to have 3 Aboriginal students and 14 students from refugee backgrounds. The remit for the study therefore shifted from a focus on Aboriginal students to instead be a response to the cultural difference that inhabited these classrooms. An Australian culturally responsive pedagogy needed to be responsive to the cultural differences of a superdiverse classroom (see Rigney, 2023a). This study focused on mainstream middle school classrooms with Indigenous students, using a collaborative, multi-sited participatory action research approach. It involved teachers, researchers, Aboriginal Education Officers and Elders in a co-creation process. This study proposed the following provocations for teachers who were keen to becoming more culturally responsive: What does a culturally responsive pedagogy need to do?

- Provide high intellectual challenge.
- Recognise cultural difference as an asset for learning.
- Connect strongly to students’ lifeworlds.
- Support the performing of learning to an audience and use multimodal literacies.
- Enable an activist orientation

(See the ‘Culturally responsive pedagogies’ chapter for more details of these provocations.)

The point of departure for the *Culturally Responsive Schooling* (CRS) project was that the whole-school supports required for culturally responsive practices had not been theorised beyond teachers working individually to undertake culturally responsive inquiry. School change discourse and policy around cultural difference as a key theme for school reform has yet to be taken seriously in the Australian context. The CRS project broadened our

understanding of teacher action supported through responsive school structural change by considering systemic whole-school modification to accommodate practice for students' achievement.

We argue that greater awareness of in-school support systems – in their everyday enactment across various educational settings – is essential for whole-school change. When appropriate support systems are in place, new patterns of pedagogical practices that address social justice through teacher practitioner inquiry can be successfully sustained beyond the initial period of enthusiasm. Support systems that can lead towards a more culturally responsive school are outlined below:

- *Whole-school commitment and collaboration:* This project emphasises that cultural responsiveness is a school-wide effort, not just an individual teacher's practice. This is achieved by:
  - Developing a professional learning community involving teachers, school leaders, researchers and community members.
  - Engaging in participatory action research to co-create an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy tailored to the local context.
  - Supporting leaders to develop and sustain a whole-of-site approach, rather than relying on isolated initiatives.
- *Centring Indigenist epistemologies:* A key part of a CRS approach, especially for improving outcomes for Indigenous students, is building partnerships with the Aboriginal community and centring Aboriginal cultures as a driving force for transformative education. This includes:
  - Embedding Aboriginal knowledges, skills, languages and cultures into the curriculum and school environment.
  - Consulting and establishing 'two-way partnerships' with local Aboriginal communities, Education Officers and Elders.
- *Mobilising students' cultural repertoires:* The approach sees students' diverse cultural backgrounds as assets and resources for learning. This perspective is put into practice by:
  - Connecting classroom teaching and learning to students' 'lifeworlds' and lived experiences.
  - Encouraging children to act as experts on their own cultures while also learning from their peers and community.
  - Providing opportunities for students to share their learning through meaningful, multimodal literacies within their community.



- *Focusing on the affective environment:* This research highlights that emotional engagement and students' sense of belonging are crucial for academic success. A culturally responsive school fosters this through:
  - Creating a positive and respectful learning environment where students feel they belong and can reach their full potential.
  - Attending to the emotional needs of students as much as their academic and cognitive needs.
  - Promoting a whole-school culture of listening and respect for cultural diversity.
- *Promoting high intellectual challenge:* Cultural responsiveness is not about lowering expectations, but rather about challenging all students to achieve their full potential. This involves:
  - Using students' cultural backgrounds as a foundation for rigorous and intellectually stimulating lessons.
  - Ensuring that curriculum and pedagogy are not disconnected from students' cultural and linguistic strengths.
- *Inspiring an activist orientation:* This approach encourages schools and students to challenge systemic inequalities and injustice. This means:
  - Building an activist orientation to create change within the community.
  - Recognising that educational inequality is a violation of children's rights and that schools have a responsibility to address it.

## **Dilemmas of leading the culturally responsive school**

Despite the compelling nature of all the principles of the multiple versions of CRS outlined above, implementing these principles in practice is far from straightforward. Culturally responsive leaders navigate a contested terrain where their commitment to serving diverse communities often collides with systemic pressures and policy mandates (Corrie, 2021; Memon et al., forthcoming). Among the many challenges they face, the following dilemmas are particularly salient:

- Culturally responsive leaders find themselves stuck between responding to the existential and unique challenges of the communities they serve and one-size-fits-all (standardising) policy regimes.
- Leaders are caught between competing imperatives for social justice and marketisation. To serve all students can be detrimental to marketing the school for 'good' students.
- The scam of devolution means that school autonomy is asserted but undermined. For instance, professional development is not framed by the professional knowledge of

teachers but by the demand to implement the right answer. Through these logics, coaching trumps action research.

- The curriculum is no longer a problem for schools and hence unresolved political issues are out of frame, such as racism, sexuality and poverty (intensifying economic inequality).
- The ‘good’ school is evaluated inside discourses of ‘evidence’ (data) that privilege high-stakes testing.
- The contradictions of performativity, and the (deleterious) effects of high-stakes testing, are not a consideration of policy debates. Post-truth demands for critical literacy are undermined by narrowing, functional and technicist definitions of literacy and numeracy.
- The politicising of history and culture taught in schools by neoliberal governing renders ‘good’ teaching apolitical.
- Neoliberal leadership (leading for policy compliance) undermines the democratic school cultures required for strong versions of teacher professionalism and the sorts of educational leadership required to redesign curriculum and pedagogy to improve students’ learning.

The educational leadership scholarship reveals that culturally responsive schooling requires leaders to move beyond managerial compliance towards transformative practice grounded in social justice, critical consciousness and authentic community engagement. Across diverse international contexts, effective culturally responsive leadership shares common imperatives: centring Indigenous epistemologies, redistributing power, fostering collaborative inquiry and creating whole-school structures that sustain pedagogical change. However, leaders face persistent dilemmas as they navigate between their commitments to cultural responsiveness and the standardising demands of neoliberal policy regimes that privilege performativity over equity.

Before concluding this literature review, it is important to pause and consider some of these dilemmas a little more as these configure the practical terrain in which culturally responsive leadership is enacted, particularly the school-level conditions that shape what is possible for teachers and leaders. This is not a further review of the literature but a brief discussion that draws together key issues that help contextualise culturally responsive leadership within the everyday realities of schools. To situate the conclusion that follows, the next section turns to the role of whole-school reform, examining how the dynamics of educational disadvantage intersect with school organisation.

## Whole-school reform

As schooling policy in Australia forces schools into a marketising form of school devolution – a policy approach in which authority and responsibility are shifted from central education departments to individual schools – we witness the withering of a discourse of whole-school reform (Connell, 1993; Connell et al., 1991; Keddie et al., 2023; Thomson, 2002). Put differently, school devolution policy in Australia is a scam and continues to damage the work of teachers, especially in public schools. Although framed as empowering principals and communities, these policies are strongly shaped by managerialist and market-driven reform agendas. In practice, they promise empowerment but deliver increased surveillance and compliance, shifting responsibility downward while systemic problems remain unaddressed so that risk is offloaded without a redistribution of power or resources. Such policies intensify inequity while presenting the appearance of choice, by increasing competition between schools in ways that advantage already well-resourced communities and disadvantage schools serving low socio-economic status, Indigenous and migrant communities.

This policy flies in the face of the realities of schooling: it is in schools that the work gets done; it is in schools that changes have to be made to improve outcomes; and reforms to teaching (pedagogy) that can make a difference can only be developed in schools because it is in schools that the unique nature of a school's community can be understood and a meaningful response can be crafted. Contemporary school devolution policy asserts that it is a school's responsibility to improve outcomes and it places huge stress on school leaders; it is under the auspices of school devolution policy that we have a perverse funding scheme that privileges the funding needs of private schools, all in the name of equity! No one dare take government funding from 'private' schools, and the possibilities for school-based reform are now seriously curtailed by other sets of policies such as mandating standardisation, high-stakes testing and so-called evidence-based practice.

The challenge of improving classroom practice is greatest in high-poverty and high-difference contexts because the standard classroom or 'normal' practice is less likely to work there. This is not because young people in these settings are less capable of success at school, but because these schools often carry the burden of residualisation, where they are left with concentrated disadvantage as more resourced families move elsewhere. As a result, they must rely heavily on the limited experience of first-time teachers and leaders and cope with high turnover among both students and staff. While individual teachers in these settings are able to make a difference by improving the outcomes of students, an evaluation of the *Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement* project (Hattam et al., 2011) affirms the importance of considering the school as *the* site of reform.

Studies have demonstrated that the following features are important in enacting successful and sustainable whole-school change:

- having coherence between school aims, curriculum and professional development

- having a focused school improvement plan that is owned by staff and designed to enact reform
- improving literacy outcomes by unsettling deficit views of young people and their communities
- getting teachers out from behind the classroom door and normalising a culture of peer accountability
- nurturing a school-wide professional learning community that promotes critical reflection by teachers (Hardy, 2010).

What do we know about ‘actually existing pedagogies’ (Lingard, 2007, p. 246) that dominate in schools serving high-poverty and high-difference communities? Without being extensive, recent Australian studies such as the *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study*, the *Changing Schools Changing Times Project*, and *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North* provide useful findings. For example, Lingard (2007) refers to the dominant pedagogies as pedagogies of indifference or pedagogies of the same: summarised as being strong in care for students, but they mostly ‘fail to work with and across differences’, and also ‘fail to make a difference in their lack of both intellectual demand and connectedness to the world’ (p. 246) (see also Lingard et al., 2001; Hayes et al., 2006). This view was confirmed by Hayes et al. (2009): ‘classrooms practices are very traditional, following predictable routines, and are largely unsuccessful as far as formal learning is concerned’ (pp. 251–252) (see also Knapp et al., 1995). Hayes et al., (2009) argue that ‘these conditions may be widespread and not limited to high-poverty contexts. However, in challenging circumstances, more is riding on the efficacy of classroom practice because poor families are highly dependent on schooling for their educational resources’ (p. 252). But then as Hayes et al. (2009) argue:

The key issue is not what kinds of pedagogies improve educational outcomes but how to support the development of the kinds of pedagogies that we have good reason to believe will work. As in the past, the sticking point remains practice. (p. 253)

They point out that the present model for improving pedagogy involves adopting the institutionally supported framework (‘New Basics’, ‘Quality Teaching’ or the ‘Teaching for Effective Learning Framework’), which implies that all that is required is adopting the framework faithfully into your context. This model shows no sign of being successful in disadvantaged schools, as it is local knowledge about practice that largely determines what kinds of pedagogies get adopted. As a consequence, ‘improvement relies upon being able to develop new knowledge about what is possible in these contexts and that this is primarily a pedagogical challenge associated with supporting the professional learning of teachers and leaders’ (Hayes et al., 2009, p. 263).

Importantly also, the above description of normal practice does not account for the pedagogical innovations being practised in schools. As Hayes et al. (2009) point out, ‘disadvantaged

schools' have a few teachers who do make a difference, whose pedagogies enable students to learn challenging relevant learning tasks that lead to success in the mainstream game of school. In a similar vein, there are examples of teachers whose professional development experiences have led to the sort of 'turn-around' documented by Comber and Kamler (2005). Turn-around pedagogies involve, in the first instance, confronting deficit views of students, which then acts as a provocation for curriculum and pedagogical redesigns, leading to a subsequent turn-around of students' learning. What such research points to is the urgent need to examine the approach of teachers who are making a difference in challenging school contexts, and to research specifically 'the complexities of producing sustainable pedagogical and curriculum change' (Comber & Kamler, 2006, p. 21). Simply put, we need to be researching teachers' engagement in the process of redesigning pedagogy (Bokhorst-Heng et al., 2006). The research focus should not be mapping pedagogy *per se*, but instead researching the possibilities for literacy pedagogical innovation in primary and secondary schools serving low socio-economic status school communities.

Taken together, these insights highlight the interconnected conditions that enable meaningful, sustained change in disadvantaged school contexts. The following whole-school reform model (Figure 4) illustrates how improving students' achievement in mainstream classrooms depends on redesigning both curriculum and pedagogy through sustained, school-wide collaboration. The model emphasises that meaningful reform requires a critical mass of teachers engaging in rigorous pedagogical change that connects students' lifeworlds to the mainstream curriculum, sets intellectually demanding tasks, and enables students to perform their learning in public ways. To achieve this, action research provides the necessary structure for systematic professional learning, supporting educators to work collectively as researchers of their own practice while incorporating strong versions of student voice and educational leadership to sustain whole-school transformation.

Together, these elements underscore that meaningful school reform relies on coherent, collective work across pedagogy, teacher inquiry and school leadership.



**Figure 4:** Whole-school reform model (developed by Robert Hattam as part of the *Educational Leadership and Turnaround Literacy Pedagogies* project, ARC Linkage 2012–14; see Appendix A)

## **Conclusion: Leading the culturally responsive school**

This literature review has traced the intellectual, political and pedagogical foundations of culturally responsive schooling, demonstrating that transforming education in Australia requires a deep engagement with both theory and practice. Across the bodies of literature reviewed – on pedagogy, action research and leadership – a consistent theme emerges: culturally responsive schooling is sustained when teachers and leaders work collectively to re-design curriculum and pedagogy in ways that affirm students’ identities and promote social and educational justice. Our review highlights that successful culturally responsive schools are driven by leaders who understand pedagogy as the core work of schooling and who create the conditions for it to flourish. We found that when leadership is aligned with culturally responsive pedagogical principles it can sustain changes in teaching practice, strengthen school–community relationships and deepen teachers’ professional agency.

However, there is a gap in the literature on culturally responsive school (CRS) leadership in Australia. While international studies provide useful insights, there has been little empirical work that connects leading the culturally responsive school directly to the enactment and sustaining of culturally responsive *pedagogy* at the whole-school level. Mainstream educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) literature tends to focus on organisational management, policy compliance or generic change processes; it rarely addresses the question of leading pedagogy – the central work of schools. For those seeking to advance a culturally responsive school, we argue that the most valuable leadership insights are to be found in the pedagogy literature, and that the five key ideas underpinning culturally responsive pedagogies can also guide the work of leading a culturally responsive school (see Figure 5) (Hattam et al., forthcoming). To conclude this review, then, we draw from our research to share key insights into how the five key ideas for a culturally responsive practice can inform the leadership of professional learning communities and the practical work of leading the culturally responsive school.

### **1. Strongly connect to teachers’ lifeworlds**

Effective CRS leadership begins by engaging with educators’ professional realities, experiences and local contexts rather than imposing abstract models. In practice, this means creating professional learning spaces where teachers can interrogate and adapt CRP principles in ways that reflect their own histories, values, and relationships with students and communities (A. Morrison et al., 2023; Rigney, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Schulz & Diplock, 2024). In doing so, leaders enable identity work for teachers (Vass et al., 2023, p. 105), fostering a deeper alignment between their sense of purpose, their pedagogical choices and their students’ needs.



**Figure 5:** Five key ideas for culturally responsive school leadership  
(<https://culturallyresponsivepedagogy.com.au/key-concepts/>)

## **2. View cultural difference as an asset for learning**

Culturally responsive leaders cultivate staff cultures that value the diverse social, cultural and professional backgrounds of educators as a resource for school improvement (Macgill & Blanch, 2013). By building trust, encouraging reciprocal mentoring and embracing multiple knowledge systems, leaders can create collaborative environments where different perspectives enrich practice and strengthen community engagement (Lowe, 2017; Weuffen, Lowe, & Burgess, 2023).

## **3. Offer high challenge**

Just as CRP demands rigorous intellectual work from students, CRS leadership should expect and support teachers to engage in ambitious, theoretically informed professional learning. Leaders can protect time and space for inquiry, encourage the testing and reshaping of theory through practice, and resist the narrowing effects of compliance-driven reform. This positions teachers as critical, knowledgeable professionals who are central to educational transformation (Giroux, 2018; hooks, 1994).



#### **4. Foster a critically conscious/activist orientation**

CRS leadership recognises that schooling is never politically neutral. Leaders model and support pedagogical approaches that challenge deficit thinking, disrupt racism and promote democratic engagement (Amazan et al., 2023; Rigney, 2006, 2021). This involves nurturing racial literacy (Maher et al., 2024; Schulz et al., 2023a, 2023b), supporting social justice-oriented curricula, and enabling staff to work collectively on the political and ethical dimensions of education.

#### **5. Enable multimodal and public sharing of learning**

Finally, culturally responsive leaders ensure that teachers' learning is made visible within and beyond the school. By supporting diverse modes of sharing, from informal peer exchanges to public presentations, leaders promote democratic accountability and position teachers as knowledge producers (Hattam, 2024; Hayes et al., 2006; A. Morrison et al., 2023; Rigney, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Sisson et al., 2025). Such visibility affirms the intellectual work of educators and connects it to broader community priorities.

The parallel between CRP and CRS leadership provides both a conceptual and practical pathway for Australian schools, and a compelling agenda for future research. Overall, culturally responsive school leadership shifts away from the autocratic, compliance-driven models that rely on passive acquiescence from teachers and students. Instead, it embraces democratic negotiation with staff, students and community, grounded in an assets-based understanding of each as theorists and producers of knowledge.



## Appendices

### Appendix A: Previous projects that have informed this literature review

#### *Teachers' Learning project*

ARC SPIRT Grant 1996–98. ARC \$135,000, DECS \$150,000

J. Smyth, M. Lawson, with R. Hattam and P. McInerney

This was a joint university–school sector project funded by the Australian Research Council between the South Australian Department for Education and Children's Services (DECS) and the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching. This project had as its primary interest teacher-managed forms of learning in schools.

#### *Within Reach of All: A Study of Factors Affecting the Retention of Students and the Successful Completion of the South Australian Certificate of Education (Students Completing Schooling project)*

ARC SPIRT Grant 1998–2001. ARC \$300,00, DETE \$150,000, SSABSA \$150,000

J. Smyth, with R. Hattam, J. Edwards, J. Cannon, N. Wilson and S. Wurst.

This project was an Australian Research Council–funded SPIRT Grant between the Department for Education, Training and Employment, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australian and the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching which aimed to clarify the factors which inhibit universal student retention and success in the South Australian Certificate of Education. Publications include Hattam (2011), Hattam and Smyth (2003), Smyth and Hattam (2001), and Smyth et al. (2004).

#### *Indigenous Research Methodologies: Frameworks Toward Indigenous Intellectual Sovereignty and the Decolonisation of Research*

ARC Discovery Indigenous Researchers Development Grant 2003–06. \$74,000

L.-I. Rigney

This project aimed to critically examine theories and methods of research enquiry emerging from contemporary Indigenous Australian research scholarship. It asked: 'What is Indigenous about Indigenous research?' and 'Can there be a distinctive Indigenous Australian perspective on epistemology, methodology and philosophy of research?' Publications include Rigney (2006), and Ma Rhea and Rigney (2002).

***Rethinking Reconciliation and Pedagogy in ‘Unsettling Times’ (Reconciliation Pedagogy project)***

ARC Discovery Project 2004–06. \$150,000

R. Hattam, P. Bishop, J. Matthews, P. Christie and P. Ahluwalia

This project aimed to rethink reconciliation in pedagogical terms. Publications include Hattam and Matthews (2012) and Hattam et al. (2012).

***Reinvigorating Middle Years Pedagogy in ‘Rustbelt’ Secondary Schools (Redesigning Pedagogy in the North RPiN project)***

ARC Linkage Project 2004–07. ARC \$363,000, DECS \$376,410, AEU \$25,000, Social Inclusion Unit \$5,000

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This Australian Research Council Linkage grant (in conjunction with 10 northern area secondary schools, the Social Inclusion Unit and the Australian Education Union) aimed to build professional and scholarly knowledge and practice for middle schooling curriculum and pedagogy that engaged young people’s lifeworlds in public schools of Adelaide’s northern area ‘rustbelt’. Publications include Hattam and Prosser (2008), Hattam et al. (2009), Prosser et al. (2010), Zipin and Hattam (2009), and Zipin et al. (2012).

***Educational Leadership and Turnaround Literacy Pedagogies***

ARC Linkage Project 2012–14. ARC \$180,000, DECS \$240,000

R. Hattam, B. Comber and D. Hayes

There is an urgent need to improve literacy achievement in those schools serving predominately low socio-economic status communities. In South Australia there is evidence of emerging forms of educational leadership leading to significant turnarounds in leadership practices, teacher pedagogy and student literacy achievement. Specifically this research examined the ways in which new forms of educational leadership are developing in South Australian public schools and its effects on school culture, pedagogy and student literacy learning. The research aimed to produce case studies and new theorisations of educational leadership to inform policy and practice. Publications include Hayes et al. (2017).

## Appendix B: Comparison of mainstream leadership approaches and critical leadership studies

To provide some conceptual clarity, the following table compares the two approaches to educational leadership studies reviewed in the ‘Educational leadership’ chapter.

	<b>Mainstream leadership approaches: School improvement and school effectiveness</b>	<b>Critical leadership studies</b>
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School ranking, student attainment scores</li> <li>- Failing schools/individual schools</li> <li>- Teamwork (distributed leadership)</li> <li>- Schools must align to system needs/national priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educative process and leading educationally</li> <li>- Failing systems/systemic problems</li> <li>- Democracy (democratic leadership)</li> <li>- Schools are responsive to learner/community needs</li> </ul>
Concerned about	Achievement, measurement, quantifiable outcomes, effectiveness	Power, under/privilege, in/equity, in/justice, difference, diversity, context, situatedness
Informed by	Quantifiable data as evidence-based research	Theoretically informed research that troubles epistemological foundations
Assumes	Research evidence is neutral, value free, theory free and can be applied across contexts	Each context is distinctly informed by its own histories, stories, needs, challenges and aspirations
Common terms	School effectiveness, outcome-based learning, evidence-based data, data-driven instruction	Relationality, complexities, contexts, reflexivity, critical, equity, power, privilege
Key proponents	E. D. Hirsch, John Hattie, Ken Leithwood, Lyn Sharratt	Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Stephen Ball, Pat Thompson, Amanda McKay
Leader’s role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organisational, managerial, performative leadership</li> <li>- Implementation of strategies, tools and ‘what works’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Democratic, critical, responsive leadership</li> <li>- Critical practitioner reflexivity</li> </ul>

This table is a summary of key ideas presented in Niesche and Heffernan (2020), Blackmore (2013), Courtney et al. (2018a), Hammersley-Fletcher (2018), and Raffo and Gunter (2008).

## Appendix C: History of critical leadership studies timeline

As a way to summarise the history of critical leadership scholarship, the following provides a timeline of the emergence of important themes.

**1978:** Burns (1978) highlights the difference between transactional leaders, who achieve strategic objectives for their organisation or institution through bargaining, negotiation or exchange of benefits that satisfy the pragmatic self-interests of the parties involved (political opponents, labour-management divisions, executives and managers), and transformational leaders, who mobilise the energies and commitments of others in the organisation or institution around a common cause or ideal beyond self-interest. That common cause points towards a deeper or richer human value for the larger community.

**1986:** Foster (1986) argues for transformative leadership that aims to be critically educative in ways that ‘not only look at the conditions in which we live, but it must also decide how to change them’ (p. 185).

**1989:** Smyth (1989) publishes *Critical perspectives on educational leadership* and links transformative leadership to pedagogical leadership. Smyth imagines a leader who actively reclaims the pedagogical and the critical in schools; links the pedagogical with the political in schools; engages in reflection on action; and develops a more situated pedagogy that acknowledges the importance of dialogical relations in education.

**1990:** I. M. Young (1990, 1997) publishes *Justice and the politics of difference*. She argues that decision-makers concerned with justice attend to everyday realities by recognising differences among people and differences in contexts of culture. For Young a justice-oriented leadership refuses to exercise power over people. Justice includes opportunity, self-respect, autonomy, decision-making, cultural capital and rights, as well as fair distribution of resources.

**1991:** Quantz et al. (1991) argue that traditional theories of leadership are inadequate for democratic empowerment and that ‘only the concept of transformative leadership appears to provide an appropriate direction’ (p. 96).

**1993:** Ball (1993, 1998, 2006) makes the case for the consequential effects of (neoliberal) policy on the practice of schooling.

**2001:** Gunter (2001) presents four positions on educational leadership – critical, humanistic, instrumental and scientific – to develop critical leadership studies’ concern about the subjectivity of the school principal. She argues that populist notions of transformational leadership are rooted in scientific and instrumental models.

**2004:** Starratt (2004) argues for transformative social justice-oriented leadership that practises an ethics of care, justice and critique.

**2011:** Starratt (2011) compares transactional, transformational and transformative leadership for a multicultural, diverse and democratic society, while Shields (2011) proposes a transformative leadership framework for social justice.

**2013–22:** Gillies (2013), Ball (2017), Heffernan (2018), Niesche and Gowlett (2019), and Mifsud (2017, 2021) make the case for the continued and expanded use of social, critical and political theories in the field of educational leadership. Here, critical tools are used to reimagine the identities and practices of principals, teachers, students and community.





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