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The Context for Change: Reconceptualising the 3Rs in Education for Indigenous Students

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Abstract: In 2011, three years on from the Apology given by Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd to the Stolen Generations and coupled with the Federal Governments agenda to ‘close the gap’ in education for Aboriginal students, perhaps it is time to retrospectively look at the issues and challenges that have moulded the terrain of Aboriginal education in Western Australia. It is clear that over the last 200 years there has been progress in improving the access of schooling for many Aboriginal students. However the retention and successful completion of compulsory schooling still remain at unacceptable levels. Given that historically many Indigenous students have underachieved in most aspects of their ‘western’ education then it stands to reason that the basic 3R concept of Reading, [W]riting and [A]rithmetic are inaccessible for many Indigenous students in their present form. Perhaps the most appropriate strategy today, in outcome-based education, and to assist with ‘closing the gap’, would be to reconceptualise the 3R concept into a more tangible form.

Vignette

Whilst having a conversation with some Aunties regarding what I was doing with my work at university, we ‘yarned’ about the 3Rs in education. I noticed one old Auntie chuckling away to herself and I asked “what is so funny?” Her reply was “3Rs? You mean the ones in education? Only one starts with R and they think we have literacy problems”. Some may say that Auntie was being facetious, however, I think she highlighted what many had been thinking since the concept of the 3Rs was first introduced in the 19th Century.

Introduction

The above yarn with my Aunts got me thinking what is it about education that is so troubling for Aboriginal¹ students? This very question has plagued all sectors of education and is a very worrying reminder that still, today, schools are failing Aboriginal students. Part of the Australian Government’s Reconciliation process and policy objectives is the campaign to ‘close the gap’ in education for Indigenous students. The term ‘close the gap’, is used in

¹ The terms *Aboriginal* and *Indigenous* are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer collectively to the First Australians as a matter of respect and to evoke the right to self-determine. Due to the problematic nature of using only one of these terms, I use both to be inclusive.

Australia to refer to the horrendous gap between the health and life expectancy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The national campaign emerged following calls from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, for ‘commitment by the federal government to achieve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and life expectation equality with 25 years’ in the *Social Justice Report* (2005). From this, the ‘close the gap’ campaign was born.

Since the release of the *Social Justice Report* (2005), the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has become the vehicle that is driving the ‘close the gap’ agenda. Initially focusing on health initiatives, the campaign has now swung around to education – with the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) raising concerns that there are “significant gaps remaining for Aboriginal students” in education and this is still maintaining ‘intergenerational disadvantage’ (MCEECDYA, 2010-2014, 4).

With the Australian Government’s clear focus on ‘closing the gap’ in education for Aboriginal students, how do we as educators actively and consciously ‘close the gap’? Unlike their peers many Indigenous students leave school much earlier, and in doing so leave without adequate literacy and numeracy skills to meet their future needs — just how do we close this gap? What is it that both the institutions and teachers need to change to make schools places where Aboriginal students can not only experience success but also feel they are welcome and want to stay? We cannot ignore the historical contexts that have shaped the terrain of Aboriginal education: in fact, in order to understand the terrain of education for Indigenous students then education ‘...must be considered with an historical and social context prior to and following European settlement’ (White, Ober, Frawley & Bat, 2010, 86). We can, however, use these contexts to retrospectively look at the issues and challenges for Aboriginal students — to look critically at ‘the patterns of tradition and hierarchy that reproduce inequality’ (Down, 2004, 24). Given that the institution of education in Western Australia as we know it today is based on a model that came with colonial governance, then perhaps it is time to [re] address the fundamental concept that underpins this model — the 3Rs.

The expression ‘3Rs’ (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) was coined by the English Banker and politician, Sir William Curtis about 1807. These 3Rs reflect an emphasis on Eurocentric educational values. Woods (1998) asserts that the 3Rs of Indigenous education are Racism, Reconciliation and Rights. Raven (1999) contends that we must move beyond the 3Rs to achieve the wider goals of education. Nonetheless, today the principles of the 3Rs are embedded into the Australian education system.

However, for Aboriginal peoples the 3Rs associated with their schooling experiences and history have long been associated with the *terra nullius* mind-set and the notions of social Darwinism — and instantiated in deficit. By this I mean that the 3Rs have been — and still are — attributed to Aboriginal students as Rudimentary, Ruinous and Racist and are ‘conforming to the implicit ethnocentrism of Terra Nullius’ (Butler, 2000, 93-95). Furthermore, ‘the spectre of Terra Nullius continues to imbue the education system with problematic responses both to the needs of Aboriginal students and in the representation of Aboriginal issues to students as a whole’ (Butler, 2000, op.cit.).

One only has to peruse the completion and retention figures for Aboriginal students over the last 40 years to see the effects that are associated with these 3Rs for Aboriginal students. Purdie and Buckley indicate that the ‘retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 in 2009 was at 45% for Indigenous students compared with 77% for non-Indigenous students’ (2010, 1) and Godfrey and King note that the ‘proportion of Indigenous peoples who had

completed Year 12 was 29% in major cities and 13% in remote areas' (2010, 8). What is clear here is that Indigenous students are grossly under-represented in the area of education, what I will restate is that if educators are serious about 'closing the gap' for Aboriginal students in education then we must give serious consideration to reconceptualising the 3Rs in Education into — *Responsibility, Relationships and Respect*.

Scott McLeod reminds us that:

Technically it is the 21st Century, but our schools are not there, and our challenge now is to reinvent schools for the 21st century — for the sake of our children, our students and the welfare of our world. Making a paradigm shift is not easy. After all, when any of us thinks of education, we usually think of what we knew as school — the way it has always been. That is how parents, policy makers, politicians and many students think of school. But we have to make the paradigm shift to 21st century education. (McLeod, 2010, p. 1)

Whilst McLeod is speaking particularly of the technological revolution of schools, it is the idea of a paradigm shift that is particularly pertinent for Aboriginal students, as generations of Aboriginal students have learnt to be 'unsuccessful' within the terrains of education. The 'shift' of reconceptualising the 3R paradigm I believe is the most foundational premise on which we [educators] can begin to redress the possibilities of education 'closing the gap' for Aboriginal students.

This paper explores the reconceptualisation of the 3Rs in education. The discussion begins with a review of the historical context of schooling for Aboriginal students; explores the 3R concept; discusses the *terra nullius* mind-set alongside the notions of Social Darwinism; and the reconceptualisation of the 3R concept. More importantly, the aim of this paper for me, as an Indigenous educator and academic, is to open up and generate dialogue and give an Indigenous perspective on the 3Rs in the hope of reshaping education for future generations of Aboriginal students and non-Indigenous teachers.

BC — Before Cook: A Little Bit of History

If one were to believe the word of written history, we would perhaps think that education came to Western Australia in 1829. However, I argue that education did not come to Western Australia with the colonisers. In fact, education had already been here for some 40,000 to 60,000 years. Education was not conducted in a classroom with students sitting behind a desk. Rather it was undertaken as the Responsibility of Elders both *Maaman and Yoks*² (men and women) and was based on Relationships and Respect. In *Nyungar* Country, Western Australia, *Maaman and Yoks* have roles based on their relationships with kin, moieties and relational knowledge rather than individual knowledge (Yunkaporta, 2007-2009, 5) and the quintessential role of Elders was 'to teach; teaching the cultural values, passing on knowledge and belief systems within stories [...] ensuring the learning process took place' (Stasiuk, 2010, 88).

These days the landscape may have been carved up, people may have been removed and or returned to Country, old fellas may have passed on but wherever one is physically

² I have incorporated *Nyungar* language throughout this paper. *Nyungar Boodjar* (Country) is in the south-west corner or Western Australia and extends from south of Geraldton along the coast to Cape Leeuwin, continuing south-east to Esperance. 'It is an area of almost 3 000 000 hectares with 1600 kilometres of coastline' (Green, 1984, 1) This region is occupied by 14 regional language groups. My maternal Connection to Country is both *Wadjuck* and *Wudjari*.

located, one thing has never changed, and that is the Responsibility, Relationship and Respect one has for being Nyungar and the ‘ways of being, knowing and doing’ (Martin, 2005).

My *ngnark* (mother) taught me my connections, her *ngnark* taught her and I have taught my *koolungar* (children). If educators are serious about ‘closing the gap’ for Aboriginal students in education and ‘undoing’ the damage that has impacted upon the successful completion and retention rates for generations of Aboriginal students then we [educators] must give consideration to modelling the 3Rs shown in Aboriginal children’s upbringing — Responsibility, Relationships and Respect.

Reconceptualised 3Rs —Responsibility, Relationships and Respect

Since ‘formal’ education was introduced in Western Australia, for Aboriginal students that education covered more or less the 3R basics — that is, Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. While these staples are still important, there are bigger issues. Given the ‘deficit’ or *terra nullius* mind-set that legitimated the notion of giving Aboriginal students only the basics, this, I believe, is where we need to [re] begin. Freire’s educational theory suggests that ‘knowing is a social process’ and that in order for students to learn:

[...] our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposes on us: without this, we have no access [...]. (Lyons, 2001, p.1)

Responsibility must underpin the teaching profession’s ethos. Teachers have a responsibility to know Aboriginal Australia and all that it encompasses; teachers have a responsibility to know and understand the ‘connection to country’ for Aboriginal peoples. Teachers have a responsibility to know about the ‘*Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing*’ (Martin, 2005). Further, teachers have a responsibility to know and understand that the initial relationship early Australian invaders/settlers had with Aboriginal Australians, was one that was not only biased and unjust but one that stemmed from a hidden agenda to destroy a whole ‘race’ of people.

This founding issue of *terra nullius* will and does, for many Aboriginal students, transcend the classroom through ‘deficit’ notions and practices. Therefore, it is a teacher’s responsibility to move away from the *terra nullius* mind-set. The vehicle of choice for moving away from this is in the teaching of Aboriginal Studies and perspectives across the curriculum.

Relationships are a fundamental tenet in Aboriginal cultures and teachers must build up relationships with not only the Aboriginal students in their classrooms, but also with the families that cares for those children. The MCEECDYA *Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014* indicated that school leaders and teachers must strengthen relationships with local Aboriginal communities. It is essential that teachers come to understand the relationships that occur from the Aboriginal person’s ‘connection to country’ and their obligations not only to country but also to family — essentially, all educators must build their knowledge of Aboriginal histories, cultures and contemporary issues.

At present, I believe that there are numerous value laden judgements placed upon Aboriginal students when, for example, they attend to family obligations. In turn, it is perceived that Aboriginal parents do not care about their children’s schooling because many teachers are coming from the *terra nullius* mind-set. However, I would argue that as

Aboriginal children's worldview encompass all life experiences 'from womb to tomb' (Martin, 2005, p. 36) then it stands to reason that teachers must come to a point where they understand these relationships and do not judge Aboriginal students, nor the issues, as having little or no value.

Respect is a word and an action that many Aboriginal Australians have never been afforded due to the social constructions that began at invasion and that have now become entrenched within the language of 'deficit' towards Aboriginal peoples in Australian society. In order to respect Aboriginal peoples, their cultures and worldviews, then we must 'look back' at the past events in order to see why and how Australia's relationships with Aboriginal Australians was constructed and how this construction manifested and distorted itself into unmitigated disrespect for Aboriginality as a whole. Fredericks (2008, p. 2) argues that 'basic respect needs to be a platform from which listening takes place'. She states further that Aboriginal peoples 'are continually seen as the 'problem' and little about us, or our lives is seen as positive' (2008, p. 3). When we truly come to understand this process of respect by listening, then and only then are we able to [re] begin a mutually- respectful relationship. Teachers need to have and give respect for Aboriginality in all its diversity so as to establish a rapport of relatedness with Aboriginal stakeholders in their schools. If we are serious in our intentions of 'closing the gap' in education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students then reconceptualising the 3Rs is not an insurmountable hurdle, but more a fundamental to removing the Eurocentric centre of education.

Education departments can no longer absorb or contain the 'Other' as one of whom little is expected, in whom something is lacking, or who can be attached to the *terra nullius* or 'deficit' mind-sets. Surely, prevailing commonsense indicates that a time for invoking effective and sustainable change is long overdue?

AC – After Cook

To create the historical portrait of education for Aboriginal students since colonisation then one needs to be familiar with the Australian context. For it is upon invasion/colonization (I use these two terms interchangeably - depending upon your perspective, Australia was either invaded or colonised). Either way, the doctrine officially laid down by the British Crown was that Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia and that when he did there was no-one here, the land was empty, uninhabited: *terra nullius*. The *terra nullius* falsehood became the dominant narrative of the colonisers, a narrative that indicated that 'Aborigines' weren't real people, they were 'savages', 'heathen blacks' that had no real culture so the British would have to 'Christianise' them into 'white western ways' (Haebich, 1988).

In the 1840s, the Colonial Government of Western Australia funded a number of church-run schools. Throughout the 19th Century Aboriginal education was entirely in the control of religious groups. Marsh and Stafford state that 'the provision of educational facilities for Aborigines (sic) over the decades has been one of extreme insensitivity to their special problems and needs [...] Australian educators did not veer from their goal of endeavouring to assimilate all school-age children' worse still '....aborigines were stereotyped as being ethnically inferior' (1984, p. 41).

In truth, Aboriginal cultures, languages, histories and knowledge were neither recognised nor respected by the British Crown, nor any of the religious organisations. More importantly, this *terra nullius* preamble of the self-imposed government set the stage for an

impeded education, an education that rendered the Australian Aboriginals firstly as invisible; secondly as deficit and; thirdly in need of educational basics only. This principal act of deceit paved the way for the *terra nullius* mind-set to be entrenched, not only in public opinion but moreover in public institutions, such as education. This attitude set the scene for future and current education policies and practices, all of which were based in the 3Rs of deficit — *Rudimentary*, *Ruinous* and *Racist*. School principals had the support of legislation such as the Industrial Schools Act (1874) to exclude or include Aboriginal students in their schools. If Aboriginal students were allowed to attend a school it was ‘a rudimentary education’ that was provided (Haebich, 1988, p. 67). In 1897, the Aborigines Act effectively transferred all functions of the Aboriginal Protection Board over to an Aborigines Department. The Chief Protector became the guardian and relieved both employers and the Department of Education of their responsibility of educating Aboriginal children (Green, 2004, p. 43).

Further, the newly appointed Chief Protector of *Aborigines*, A. O. Neville (‘Mr Devil’ as he is more commonly referred to among Aboriginal people) believed that a policy of *laissez-faire* should be followed because ‘the aborigines would probably be extinct in Australia within 50 years’ (Neville, 1937, p. 21). However, should the possibility of extinction not occur, Neville advocated that ‘the purpose of training Aboriginal children to be useful’ was beneficial, further proclaiming in the minutes of the 1937 ‘Breed the Colour Out Conference’ that:

if the coloured people of this country are to be absorbed in the general community they must be thoroughly fit and educated at least to the extent of the three R’s. If they can read, write and count, and know what wages they should get, and how to enter into an agreement with an employer, that is all that should be necessary. (Neville, 1937, p. 15)

What is clearly evident here is that all of these Acts of this time were underpinned by 3Rs that were Rudimentary, Ruinous and Racist for Aboriginal students — *Rudimentary* because if one were ‘lucky’ enough to be granted access to school then one was given the bare basics, albeit at a very elementary level; *Ruinous* because these ‘luxury’ basics have affected generations of Aboriginal students in every state or territory in Australia, and the retention and completion rates in education for Indigenous students substantiate my point; *Racist* because the all policies pertaining to education for ‘Aborigines’ (sic) were based on the racist underpinnings of social Darwinism, in that ‘Aborigines’ (sic) were unintelligent and incapable of learning, and, more poignantly underserving of anything more — the 1905 Act, 1929 Aborigines Act and 1936 Native Administration Act (Haebich, 1988) are testament to the racist practices employed against Aboriginal peoples in relation to their education.

These ‘deficit’ 3Rs have moved beyond the ‘basic’ educational provision into a perilous inheritance for generations of Aboriginal students. More importantly, this has occurred in my great grandmother, grandmother and mother’s lifetimes which makes it relevant to mine and that of my children — an unequivocal fact that I am sure affects most Aboriginal families today. Less than 27per cent of Indigenous people aged over 55 years of age have completed Year 10 or above (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010). These acts of exclusion pertaining to Aboriginal participation within schools have set the present scene for the dire predicament Aboriginal students find themselves in when participating in education, as noted by Kathleen Hill (cited in Green, 2004, p. 110):

[...] many of the older respondents referred to the fact that they had been excluded from European schools. Some were not permitted to attend any school until they were nine years of age and others not until they were 14 [...]. She found that the exclusion of this generation not only contributed to their present poverty but left them unable to understand what their own children were learning at school and noted 'as he [the child] grows older the gap between home and school becomes unbridgeable.

It is a widely accepted notion (for example, Giroux, 1987; Down, 2004) that schools are sites of social reproduction: where students are exposed to formative influences, such as ways of doing and ways of knowing. As such, it could be argued that schools play a significant role in shaping all student concepts of the social world (Jackson-Barrett, 2010, p. 49). Policies have changed from protection, segregation and welfare then to assimilation, self-determination and, today, mutual obligation. Neither high expectations from teachers toward Aboriginal students nor Indigenous students aspiring to their dream careers have resulted.

More important, is the undeniable fact that many, if not all, of these policies did not and have not addressed the educational needs of Aboriginal students. Perhaps that is because they are undermined by the 3Rs of *Remedial*, *Racist* and *Ruinous* as I discussed earlier.

Looking Back

While the language and nature of education policies have changed over time what has not changed, nor has it ever been addressed, is the underlying *terra nullius* mind-set or the discourse of deficit — a mind-set that has become inter-generationally entrenched within education (and wider society) and is more often than not seen as Aboriginal students' apparent lack of interest, engagement and capability when it comes to entering the educational arena. Craven suggests:

[...] the relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people as been an unequal one [...] inequality stemmed from the very concept of *terra nullius* [...] [the] worst elements of misguided paternalism, social Darwinism and overt racism. (1994, p. 4)

The *terra nullius* mind-set appears to be consistently overlooked or not even considered as being the obstinate block to changing educational outcomes and 'closing the gap' for Aboriginal students. These considerations are never considered obvious nor are they discussed. After so many years of educational policies and the millions (perhaps billions) of dollars spent on Aboriginal educational programs, surely educators must start asking some obvious questions.

Today, the repercussions of this unequal relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are still felt. The *terra nullius* mind-set as Craven (1999) defined it, is entrenched in the Australian psyche and was formed at the onset of invasion/colonisation of the land that has become known as Australia. This mind-set is what I term the 'discourse of deficit', an ingrained mind-set of superiority that pervades our society. It has 'flourished in the domain of public opinion and in all state institutions (especially education) ... simultaneously establishing and justifying endemic racism' (Butler, 2000, p. 93).

Additionally, this mind-set imposed positions of 'inferiority, illegitimacy, savage, dying race, stone age and invisibility' upon Aboriginal Australians (Butler, 2000, p. 94-96). Moreover, Butler (2000, p. 95) contends that 'the experience of Aborigines, the diversity of

their cultures and the persistence of their very existence remained marginal to such an extent it constituted a “cult of disremembering”.

Looking Forward - Moving On

For teachers to enable their students, they must act as ‘agents of change’, to re-dress not only the 3Rs but also the *terra nullius* and ‘deficit’ mind-sets many non-Indigenous peoples have towards Aboriginal Australians; these two mind-sets have ‘been learned and relearned within successive generations’ of Australian school children over the last 200 years (Giroux, 1993, 149). Like Giroux, I believe that schools are ‘sites that are crucial for encouraging students to be critical citizens’ (Giroux, 1993, p. 1) and that the ‘teaching profession alone has the primary responsibility to educate critical citizens’ (Giroux, 1993, p. 15).

If this is so, then teachers must act as ‘agents of change’ in order to foster a change of attitude by the wider Australian community towards Aboriginal Australians and enable all Indigenous students who walk into the space where power and knowledge come together to be successful and empowered at the ‘*cultural interface*’ (Nakata, 2007) — the classroom.

Nakata ‘argues for the recognition of the complexity of the space Indigenous people now live in — the *cultural interface*’ (2007, p. 5). In this paper, I use the term ‘*cultural interface*’ as the space where teachers and students meet; in this instance it is the classroom. To be effective ‘agents of change’ and allow students to successfully cross the border — that is the space where Aboriginal students productively and effectively adapt to life between home and life within the classroom — then not only teachers, but also the departments of education most certainly need to understand and come to grips with the fact that they are well positioned to be ‘agents’.

As such these agents of change enable successful learning at the cultural interface to become a reality. The cultural interface must break the colonial shackles of both the *terra nullius* and ‘deficit’ mind-set that still excludes and marginalises Aboriginal Australians within both schooling and the wider society. Further to the ‘cultural interface’ of classrooms, Martin (2005) situates the trilogy of Aboriginal ‘*ways of being, doing and knowing*’ in her theoretical framework of *relatedness*, the Aboriginal world view or perspective of knowing the world and ‘occurs across contexts and is maintained within conditions that are physical, spiritual, political, geographical, intellectual, emotional, social, historical, sensory, instinctive and intuitive’ (Martin, 2005, p. 69). However, in this paper I have highlighted and referred to the lack of relatedness on the part of many teachers, schools and curricula in knowing and understanding Aboriginal ‘ways of being, doing and knowing’ (Martin, 2005).

If we were to combine Nakata’s (2007) ‘cultural interface’ (classrooms), Martin’s (2008) concept of ‘relatedness’, as well as the reconceptualising of the 3Rs within institutions of education that acted as ‘agents of change’, then what educators would be aspiring to would be Giroux’s (1993) ‘*Border Pedagogy*’, where schools would become spaces for:

[...] developing a democratic public philosophy that respects the notion of difference as part of a common struggle to extend the quality of public life. It presupposes not merely an acknowledgement of the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialize different configurations of culture, power and knowledge. It also links the notion of schooling and the broader category of education to a more substantive struggle for a radical democratic society

[...] Border pedagogy makes visible the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those places and borders we inherit and that frame our discourses and social relations. (Giroux, 1993, p. 28)

If we ponder the words of Giroux (1993) and connect them with any one of the numerous statistics that demonstrate Aboriginal students' underachievement, surely no-one could argue with the fact that what we have been and are doing within schools for Aboriginal students is not working as well as it might. Further, Apple argues the fact that the 'educational system — because of its very location with a larger nexus of social relations — can provide a significant terrain over which serious action can evolve (1982, p. 10). With this in mind, then, 'closing the gap' in education for Aboriginal students is not only an opportunity but a possibility.

Towards the New 3Rs

We know a surprising large amount about what Aboriginal students are not achieving in schools, what they supposedly 'lack', as there is an enormous amount of literature on the subject.

Aboriginal underachievement is a matter of concern within the institution of education and has been since invasion/colonisation. The institution of education has reinforced and upheld the *terra nullius* mind-set on which Australia was colonised — that reinforced notions of underachievement with 'deficit' labelling; labels of ignorant, incompetent, irresponsible, dumb — and the list goes on. Moreover, Indigenous students have been 'trained' to accept these labels and have rightly been disengaged with their education over generations because of this. Given that it is three years since the Apology to Australia's Stolen Generations and given the Australian Governments push to 'close the gap', perhaps it is timely to investigate the reconceptualisation of the 3Rs.

The aim of this paper is to encourage rational dialogue within/across educational institutions regarding the foundational pedagogy from within which [we] educators teach Aboriginal students.

I believe that there is a combination of things [we] educators can implement to effect changes within schools — firstly, for the empowerment of Aboriginal students and secondly, to address the mind-set of the wider education community.

Firstly, we must reconceptualise the 3Rs in education. As I have stated throughout this paper, the 3Rs must be the platform of sound teaching pedagogy and need to be reconceptualised if we are to revolutionise schools for Aboriginal students. Educators must abandon their *terra nullius* mind-sets and deficit attitudes in relation to Aboriginal peoples and cultures and take on *Responsibility, Relationships* and *Respect*. As the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) pointed out:

Teachers are the key to effective pedagogies that serve the needs of all students in all circumstances. Good teaching cannot be routine or substituted by texts and teaching materials. It requires deep and connected knowledge on the part of teachers, the exercise of complex and high level judgements both cognitive and interpersonal, and a well-informed and varied repertoire of strategies [...]. (COAG, 2008, p. xiii)

Secondly, we must address the *terra nullius* and deficit mind-sets that still permeates the terrains of education and wider society. While the latter will take generations to address, we can be active now in education at all levels. Educators need to critically engage with and understand not only Aboriginal peoples and cultures but moreover understand that there is an urgent need to reflect on one's one mind-set — educators must become culturally competent when teaching Aboriginal students, they must break free of the colonial shackles of the *terra nullius* and deficit mind-sets:

The future need not be a repetition of the past. Frequently one is caught by a paucity of imagination which conceives of the future only in terms of rearranging past events or experiences that are already known. Persistent attempts to explain the unknown in terms of what is already known, can lead to blind repetition of unsatisfactory patterns that limit growth and restrict possibilities. (Vaughan, 1979)

Thirdly, to break through the *terra nullius* and 'deficit' mind-sets the vehicle of choice is the teaching of Aboriginal Studies or perspectives across the curriculum. However, the MCEECDYA *Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014* revealed that:

31 per cent of early career primary teachers and 40 per cent of secondary teachers felt their pre-service education was of no help in preparing them to teach students from Indigenous backgrounds

and

more than 4500 Australian teachers wanted more professional development to help them to better assist Indigenous students. (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 15)

It is evident that professional development for in-service teachers is necessary. Further, pre-service teachers must undertake core units in social justice education —if we are serious in the 'closing the gap' in education for Indigenous students it is necessary for both groups of teachers to develop the ability to meet their professional responsibilities. The time has come for the institution of education and educators to move forward and 'close the gap' in education for Aboriginal students rather than keep repeating history — *djindebit wangkiny*; walk the talk.

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