

## Research summary

# Cultural responsiveness in education

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Every Australian student has a right to a complete, relevant and responsive education that is designed and delivered to give them the educational success to which they aspire. To achieve this for First Nations students and their families, schools and systems should be culturally responsive and strive to create culturally safe learning environments.

This research summary outlines research on culturally responsive teaching practices that create culturally safe learning environments. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s investigation shows that research in this area is nascent and limited, though there is emerging convergence on some themes. There is more work to be done to build the evidence base for effective culturally responsive practices, particularly on approaches to implementation that lead to sustained improvement. More research could also help build the evidence base that culturally responsive practices are beneficial for Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students alike.

## Context of First Nations education

The [Mparntwe Declaration](#) (2019) sets out a vision for education and a commitment to improving educational outcomes for young Australians. The Declaration has 2 distinct but interconnected goals:

- **Goal 1:** The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.
- **Goal 2:** All young Australians become:
  - confident and creative individuals
  - successful lifelong learners
  - active and informed members of the community (Education Council, 2019).

For First Nations students, families and communities, the achievement of these goals is often hindered by historical power structures and ingrained biases. Policies, research and teaching often disregard the misalignment between western education structures and First Nations cultural practices, values and beliefs.

AERO's ongoing consultations with First Nations individuals and communities have affirmed that building relationships that cultivate trust, engagement, confidence, respect and learning is central to understanding how First Nations students, their families and communities aspire to and experience educational success.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) [2022 report](#) affirms that teachers, school leaders and whole school communities have a responsibility to meet the learning and wellbeing needs and support the aspirations of all First Nations students, and indeed all students. Teachers and leaders need to understand their role in creating relationships with First Nations students, their families and communities. Teachers and leaders should also understand the contexts in which they are working and how children and young people, their families and their communities think about and define educational success. [Building a Culturally Responsive Australian Teaching Workforce](#) affirms that teachers, school leaders and whole school communities have a responsibility to meet the learning and wellbeing needs and support the aspirations of all First Nations students, and indeed all students. Teachers and leaders need to understand their role in creating relationships with First Nations students, their families and communities. Teachers and leaders should also understand the contexts in which they are working and how children and young people, their families and their communities think about and define educational success.

Culturally safe learning environments are foundational to meeting the learning needs and aspirations of First Nations students, their families and communities (AITSL, 2022). To create these environments, AITSL advises teachers and leaders to be culturally responsive, beginning with an examination of their own personal identity, culture, history and assumptions, along with consideration of how these affect the development of relationships with students, their families, and communities. AITSL has developed a [cultural responsiveness self-reflection tool](#), a [cultural responsiveness continuum](#) and a [capability framework](#) for professional learning.

## Summary of the evidence

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) highlight the importance of teachers implementing evidence-based teaching practices in culturally responsive ways (AITSL, 2017). To support them to do this effectively, teachers need clear advice based on the established research literature.

In 2022, AERO commissioned a literature review on cultural responsiveness aimed at identifying:

- definitions of cultural responsiveness that have been applied to Australian and international research and education contexts
- common themes and practices that are effective for culturally responsive teaching for First Nations children and young people
- existing tools used to measure culturally responsive practice
- recommendations for the development of a measure of culturally responsive practice and other future work.

This literature review highlighted that studies of cultural responsiveness were highly contextualised, and the focus and findings were consequently varied. Variability in methodological choices also affected the focus and generalisability of the studies. Few studies clearly articulated the assumptions that underpinned the research, and even fewer questioned the purpose of the research or the assumptions inherent to the positionality of the researcher. There was also a lack of rigorous and relevant research privileging First Nations Peoples' voices and addressing the outcomes that First Nations Peoples want to achieve.

From the research available, it appears cultural responsiveness is a relatively nascent field of research, and accordingly, there is limited causal evidence regarding the effectiveness of culturally responsive practices on student outcomes. There also appear to be limitations in the research literature to generating this sort of evidence, including:

- the variety of definitions of cultural responsiveness
- cultural responsiveness being operationalised in many different ways
- no standardised measures of culturally responsive practices
- diversity of views about outcomes on which culturally responsive practice might be expected to have an impact.

The limited causal evidence on cultural responsiveness means that, based on AERO's Standards of Evidence, it is not yet possible to identify specific practices or conditions that can confidently be considered evidence-based. That said, the research literature includes many examples of promising teacher-, school- and system-approaches developed and strongly supported by First Nations communities that seem to improve outcomes for students or create culturally safe learning environments. As such, to strengthen the evidence base, these promising approaches need systematic evaluation, using agreed methodologies, and using outcomes that incorporate community views about education success. Ideally, this work will be Indigenous-led and conducted in consultation with community.

Researchers should prioritise working with students and communities wherein core outcomes for culturally responsive teachers and practices are identified and enacted, so there is agreement from the outset about what success looks like. When outcomes are identified, tools can be developed that upskill teachers and educators in a way that is direct and intentional, and purposefully addresses the development of culturally responsive knowledge and practices.

Despite the limitations in the current evidence base on cultural responsiveness, it is possible to see some convergence in the research. For example, there was general agreement in the research that culturally responsive practices require reciprocity, respect and an understanding of difference (Arvanitis, 2018). Research also generally emphasised the importance of the development of relationships of trust and care between students and teachers, educators and school leaders, and suggested that culturally responsive practices can establish inclusive school cultures which support high achievement and wellbeing.

## The concept of reflexivity

Most commonly, the literature review identified ‘reflexivity’ as an emerging theme across models of cultural responsiveness. Reflexive practice (reflexivity) is a process that critically examines personal attitudes, values and biases, with a view to engaging with people in a culturally safe manner. Through reflexive practice, teachers, educators and school leaders can appraise and evaluate how their behaviours and ideas influence their teaching and learning (Ryan, 2023).

The concept of reflexivity reflects a shift in understanding of cultural responsiveness – from responsiveness to cultures different from your own, to individual responsiveness to the values, attitudes and assumptions of your own cultural background (and the practice that results from them) (Kilcullen et al., 2018). Reflexivity offers a counter to the ‘problematism’ of student culture and behaviour seen in earlier understanding of cultural responsiveness, where practices were used as interventions. Reflexivity positions the researcher, teacher or leader as the first site for careful examination and critical reflection, before action is taken that will affect students and community.

## Implications for teachers and school leaders

AERO’s literature review indicates that it is not yet possible to point to a clear, evidence-based roadmap delineating a set of culturally responsive practices which will deliver culturally safe learning environments and improved learning success.

In the absence of a robust evidence base for a specific approach to cultural responsiveness, it is useful to note that there is already a strong evidence base for effective practices that deliver successful learning, such as [explicit teaching](#), [formative assessment](#) and [well-managed classrooms](#). AERO has brought these practices together into a [model for learning and teaching](#) based on how students learn. This model recognises that – in general – cultural safety enables a learning-focused environment, and that cultural safety is more likely to exist when teachers develop cultural responsiveness to meet the learning needs and aspirations of First Nations students.

However, more research is needed to go beyond this general understanding, and to more clearly specify the most effective culturally responsive practices to implement as part of AERO’s learning and teaching model. For example, clearer evidence-based advice about implementing culturally responsive practices and behaviours integrated with explicit teaching approaches holds the promise of accelerating improved outcomes for First Nations students, as well as benefiting all students.

In addition, AITSL (2022) recommends teachers and school leaders demonstrate cultural responsiveness through ‘commitment to mutually respectful relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ and working ‘collaboratively to set the directions and priorities for the school’. AERO’s research has shown that positive engagement with families can help to improve student learning outcomes in both [primary](#) and [secondary](#) school contexts.

## Implications for policymakers

Policymakers need to be aware that while there is much research attesting to the value of desire for culturally responsive practices from First Nations communities, the causal evidence in this space is limited. While the evidence base is developed, it is important to prioritise what we know works for all students – that is, explicit teaching and associated practices.

In addition, policymakers can support development of a robust evidence base in this area by participating in further research, including Indigenous-led, field-based research that is designed to systematically test different approaches to cultural responsiveness. This will get us closer to the robust evidence base needed to build confidence among educators, teachers and leaders that they understand why and how they can incorporate culturally responsive practices that will work.

With a robust evidence base in place, policymakers can prioritise attention across the system to create a culturally responsive workforce that is confident and equipped to deliver improved learning outcomes for First Nations students – indeed all students.

## References

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