Belonging and learning to belong in school: the implications of the hidden curriculum for indigenous students

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This paper engages with current educational literature in Australia and internationally, in exploring the implications of the hidden curriculum for Indigenous students. It argues that in schools, most of the learning rules or guidelines reflect the ‘white’ dominant culture values and practices, and that it is generally those who don’t have the cultural match-ups that schooling requires for success, such as Indigenous and minority students, who face the most educational disadvantage. Howard and Perry argue that Indigenous students ‘...need to feel that schools belong to them as much as any child’ and that to ‘...move towards the achievement of potential of Aboriginal students, it is important that Aboriginal culture and language are accepted in the classroom’. This paper will also provide a discussion into school-based strategies that are considered effective for engaging Indigenous students with school.

**Keywords:** indigenous education; cultural knowledge; hidden curriculum; inclusive education; culturally responsive schooling; bi-cultural education

Introduction

It goes without saying that each child will experience education differently. The type of school they attend, the relationships they maintain with their teachers and peers, along with their family backgrounds and prior knowledge (skills and abilities), impact on the outcomes students produce in school. When students enter school, they meet a specific curriculum, a programme of study that they are to learn within, with the guidance of their teachers. The curriculum outlines to students the curricular content and modes of teaching and assessment, as well as the learning aims and expectations. Since the 1970s, there have been arguments presented in educational literature to suggest that the knowledge that is taught in schools, encompasses more than just the curriculum itself. That there are unwritten rules, regulations, standards and expectations that form part of the learning process in schools and classrooms, not specifically taught to students through the planned or open curriculum and the content.

Most of the learning rules or guidelines that form part of the hidden curriculum reflect the white dominant culture values, practices and worldviews. They emphasise to students the knowledge that is most valued, and the behaviours and practices that are considered appropriate. Students learn these rules, norms and characteristics through the school socialisation process and school organisation. The hidden

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curriculum has obvious implications for participation in mainstream education by students, because it requires students reconciling the behaviours akin to their cultural group, and those deemed necessary for achieving success (Carter Andrews, 2009).

Mainstream education has distinct ways of arranging, utilising and transmitting knowledge to students, generally based within the framework of a dominant culture. In mainstream education settings, students are expected to ‘...abandon their style of speech and learning and conform to the “correct” language and culture’ (Vang, 2006, p. 24). What this implies is that if children are to have any chance of succeeding in their education, they must take on another identity—one that is academically attuned, and aligned with the values and practices of mainstream society, sometimes different from their own. The inflexibility of mainstream education structures to accommodate alternative student experiences does little to improve overall outcomes in Indigenous education. Mainstream education settings are not only considered assimilatory, but that they also potentially threaten the cultural identities of minority learners.

Although there have been some gains made in Australian Indigenous educational in recent years, serious gaps still remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes, including levels of school attendance and retention. As Rahman (2010b) and Herbert (2002) point out, there are unacceptably high numbers of Indigenous students, including those who have made it as far as Year 11 and even Year 12, who aren’t completing their secondary education. Research in this area has found that many Indigenous students find school difficult, discouraging and alienating, and that many respond to their disaffection from school by withdrawing or resisting education (Gray & Partington, 2003; McInerney & Dowson, 2003). Resistance to formal education by Aboriginal students is often seen as a cultural response to schooling occurring when there are perceptions of inequality in the classroom (Rahman, 2010b). Gray and Partington (2003, p. 136) have found that for Indigenous students ‘...the enthusiasm for school dissipates after Year 8 and disillusion sets in when their expectations of school are not being met’. They argue that the underlying issues and problems Indigenous students face in education are not being properly addressed by our system of education (Gray & Partington 2003).

In addressing the foundations for improved outcomes for Indigenous students in school, a central question remains: how can we better align mainstream schooling with the diverse backgrounds of students to enable improved learning outcomes. How can we also develop our Indigenous students as bi-cultural learners who are competent and knowledgeable in both mainstream culture and their home culture?

This paper surveys the research literature on Indigenous education, in investigating how Indigenous students are impacted by the hidden curriculum in mainstream education. Whilst this paper addresses a specific need for research of this kind, it argues that for Indigenous students to succeed in school, they should be provided with a culturally relevant and compatible education, enabling students to learn the conditions of Western knowledge, whilst at the same time maintaining their cultural competence.

The hidden curriculum

The concept of the hidden curriculum evolved in the late 1960s through the work of various politically oriented curriculum scholars including Jackson (1968), Dreben
(1968), and Vallance (1973). However, it was through the pioneering work of Jackson (1968) on *Life in Classrooms* that the concept was given clarification. Jackson argued that school is a socialisation process where students pick up messages through the experience of simply being in school, not just from things that they are explicitly taught. He argued that there are values, dispositions, and social and behavioural expectations that brought rewards in school for students who understood the discipline of the school. The concept of the hidden curriculum ‘includes everything which is not academic but has important influences on the academic outcomes of the school’ (Sari & Doganay, 2009, p. 926). Through the hidden curriculum, students receive messages that reinforce the values, beliefs and ideologies of mainstream society. These messages are emphasised through daily routines and curricular content (Kentili, 2009), and also through school and classroom structures, teacher dispositions, the school social relationships and everyday policies and practices. For example, school examinations are seen to stimulate discipline and conformity to teacher authority. As well as this, teachers who select classroom resources that reflect the majority culture, send a message to students that minority cultures, including Indigenous, are perhaps valued less by mainstream society. The hidden curriculum does largely influence the extent to which students engage with their learning and the academic outcomes they produce.

The literature claims that there are two main dimensions to the hidden curriculum; the functionalist perspective adopted by Jackson (1968) and Drebben (1968), and the Neo-Marxist perspective (Sari & Doganay, 2009). The functionalist perspective maintains that when students begin school, they enter a specific culture whereby they learn the norms and characteristics necessary for their educational progress, and to prepare them for their adult life (Sari & Doganay, 2009; Ulriksen, 2009). On the other hand, the Neo-Marxist perspective is more politically orientated, as it is concerned with ‘examining how the social relations of schooling produce the social, racial, and gender inequalities and the relationship between the schooling and the economy’ (Sari & Doganay, 2009, p. 926). The Neo-Marxist position is interested in how the hidden curriculum reproduces social class structures, and maintains the existence of dominant cultures in society. As the literature verifies, schooling can be seen as a political process that reinforces the dominant values of Western culture over other minority cultures.

Halstead and Xaio (2010, p. 307) explain that the learning associated with a hidden curriculum can come from fellow students, as well as from teachers and the broader social environment of the school, and this can be beneficial as well as harmful. For example, one of the direct negative effects of the hidden curriculum for Indigenous learners is reflected in the ways that classroom practice undermines the cultures of Indigenous peoples, through excluding the teaching of Aboriginal cultural studies. According to Harrison and Greenfield (2011, p. 65), ‘teachers often lament that they know little about Aboriginal people, while questioning how they can be expected to include Aboriginal perspectives in their programs’. The consequence of schools taking a deliberate path of excluding Aboriginal Studies is that it sends a clear message to students, their families, the school community and others, that the shared history of Indigenous Australians is not a valued part of Australian culture (Mooney & Craven, 2005). Therefore, the hidden curriculum is also about the learning areas that are not necessarily included in classroom teaching practice that emphasise the knowledge that is or isn’t important to school and to society in general.
As part of the hidden curriculum, students meet the expectations of their teachers, in relation to their learning, and of their school behaviour. These are communicated through a pattern of consistent messages, conveyed through the school and classroom organisation and operation, curriculum and pedagogy. For example, schools emphasise positive student behaviour as being able to wait quietly, completing work on time, keeping busy and on task, cooperating in groups, being neat and punctual, demonstrating respect for authority, and conducting oneself courteously. In schools, students are also expected to follow rules of communication, to use their manners where appropriate, to listen and not talk when the teacher is talking, to ask for help from the teacher when required (rather than from their peers) and to seek permission before moving around the classroom. Ulriksen (2009, p. 519) presents a relevant argument that ‘different students have different possibilities and restraints in the way that they can perform the position of being a student, depending on gender, cultural background, etc. and the codes, norms and values in the specific disciplinary culture’. For example, in Aboriginal families, children are often raised in ways that encourage self-reliance and responsibility; children often determine their own boundaries, and settle their own conflicts, relying less on adult intervention. Aboriginal children also ‘may not follow the same rules of communication and politeness that most teachers come to expect’ (Harrison, 2011, p. 11), which has obvious implications for their participation in school.

Research by Malin (1990, 1997) demonstrates the cultural mis-match that can exist, between home and school-life for Indigenous students. Based on classroom observations and teacher and community interviews, the research explored the classroom interactions of three Aboriginal reception students with their teacher and how these interactions had an impact on the student’s performance in school. Her study showed how the failure of the teacher to recognise the three Aboriginal students’ cultural characteristics and backgrounds, resulted in their underachievement at school and the teachers’ negative views of their behaviours in class. Malin (1997, p. 140) found that ‘the skills and characteristics of the Aboriginal students which were positively valued, or simply considered normal at home, became irrelevant or disabling in school because of the contrasting cultural practices imbedded in the way classrooms function’. Malin (1990) observed these cultural differences in the way that the classroom was organised and with the teacher’s personal values and communications with the Aboriginal students in class. The cultural conflicts that occurred within the classroom, gradually led to the students becoming socially and academically marginalised and the teacher misinterpreting the motivations and behaviours of the students (Malin, 1997).

As the literature points out, there is in fact a strong connection between the hidden curriculum and the social class systems that operate within our society, and that there are clear advantages to those who are well versed in mainstream culture. If, however, the cultural and social resources, skills and qualities that students and their families have, match-up with the values of mainstream education, then this places students at an educational advantage. This is because the students have cultural familiarity and comfort in the school setting, and understand the conditions of Western knowledge and know how to apply that knowledge to their learning. These students are also generally able to predict the expectations of school, and can adjust their behaviour or academic positions accordingly to bring on educational reward.
Negotiating the hidden curriculum

Critical pedagogy as an educational theory has been used as a framework for exploring research into the oppositional nature of schooling (Willis, 1977). The theory was developed in the early 1970s, through the work of Paulo Freire (1970). Freire’s classical work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), focused on the study of social inequalities that exist in education. His work privileges the position that people should be liberated from poverty and empowered through education processes. According to Harrison (2004), pp. 148–149), in critical pedagogy theories, students are taught how to critique knowledge and reflect on their own assumptions, challenging unequal power relations and become responsible for their own learning and their goals for learning. McLaren (1998) concludes that ability of Indigenous students’ to perceive the effects of the hidden curriculum and to challenge the cultural politics of the curriculum is an important implication of critical pedagogy for Aboriginal education.

Many academics argue that the possession of school cultural knowledge, such as students understanding the codes and requirements of school success and the conditions of Western knowledge, is a critical factor for school success (Harrison, 2008; Martin, 2003, 2006; Nakata, 1997). When Indigenous students acquire knowledge of school culture, they come to understand how the school operates in terms of the norms and standards, academic expectations, appropriate codes of conduct, and ways to negotiate their success in school (Nakata, 1997). In effect, they learn how to both belong and succeed in a mainstream education setting. There is, however, no research to suggest that Indigenous students should acquire school cultural knowledge and succeed in education, at the expense of their cultural identity, practices and worldviews.

The literature claims that students who perform better in school are those who actively pursue their learning, are driven to achieve academically, and are effective in managing their own education (Harrison, 2008; Martin, 2006). According to Harrison (2008), these students not only possess a fair amount of school related knowledge on how to succeed educationally, but that they also:

\[\ldots\text{make their learning happen by asking questions, planning and organising their work,}\]

\[\text{talking with the teacher and other students and managing their time and outcomes (particularly in the senior years)}\]


Harrison (2004, 2008) laments that Indigenous students who experience success in their education have usually learnt to play the game well. They know how the relationships work in the classroom and the way in which to speak to their teachers to get what they want; they also demonstrate classroom compliance and respect for authority. These students are prepared to ‘compete for their teacher’s time, attention and recognition’ (Harrison, 2008, p. 147), they accept feedback from their teachers, and they apply this feedback in constructive ways to their learning. Successful students generally have knowledge on how to locate information required for their schooling and can predict what the teacher is wanting (Harrison, 2008). This knowledge forms part of the hidden curriculum that is not explicitly taught to students in school, but students learn to acquire that knowledge through the formal process of education.

Although Harrison (2004, 2008) posits that school related cultural knowledge is a necessary requirement for academic success, as Watego (2005) points out, for many Indigenous students and their families, the cultural and social knowledge on how to succeed in school, is not usually present. For example, some Indigenous students face
challenges in their ability to make sense of school expectations and standards, because of the differences between home-life and that of school. Brayboy and Castagno (2008, p. 742) explain that for Indigenous students to learn Western school knowledge, ‘this requires crossing cultural borders and acquiring facility in another culture’, which as Malin (1990) argues, can lead to a cultural mis-match between students’ academic and home life. There is need expressed by Brayboy and Castagno (2009), Delpit (1995) and others, for schools to be teaching Indigenous students about the dominant culture, for negotiating school success. In particular, Delpit (1995) argues that teachers need to explicitly teach students the norms and codes of the ‘culture of power’, so that the students, who are not part of the dominant culture, are able to learn and acquire the necessary skills to negotiate the culture when they choose to do so.

Hudspith (1996) applies the term ‘explicit visible pedagogy’, to discuss how student potentials for achievement can be improved, when the learning and message systems are made explicit for students. The study by Hudspith (1996) reports on a Darwin-based teacher, working effectively and differently, with her Aboriginal students. The effectiveness of the teacher was demonstrated in the way that she advanced her students academically, through resourcing them with practical and effective instructional support, and assisting them to understand the learning expectations, with explicit communication. She also incorporated the culture of the students into the class, got to know the families and communities who then became regular visitors to the class and connected with students on a personal level. The teacher was socially and culturally supportive and inclusive in her pedagogical practices, and this was shown to have impacted positively on the students learning in class (Hudspith, 1996).

A recent study by Rahman (2010a, 2010b) based on student survey and interview research, explores factors that promote Indigenous student success in secondary schooling in South Australia. Although the study identifies a number of important facilitators of student success and secondary school completion, Rahman (2010b) found that effective instructional and explicit teacher support was particularly important for improving the engagement of Indigenous students with school. According to Rahman (2010b, p. 96), many of the students who were interviewed, explained that ‘learning and understanding their work was enhanced, when teachers provided explicit detail and instructions for student assessments, going through the criteria and expectations, and then putting things into a “student language”’. As part of the interviews, students were asked what things help them to learn more effectively in school and assist their school success, to which two of the Year 12 students replied:

He [the teacher] makes it easier for me to understand. Like when the teachers give us the assignment sheet and the criteria that have to be in it, I just look at it and I’m like ‘Oh, I can’t do it’. But he makes it sort of my language, I suppose. (Rahman, 2010b, p. 96) Probably just the teachers help . . . ‘cos like when we’re in class and when they explain stuff, I don’t understand it because of the words and especially at the start of Year 12, I was all nervous and I didn’t know what they were talking about. But they always help me and lead the way, and yeah. (Rahman 2010b, p. 105)

Rahman (2010b, p. 96) explained that, some of the male students who reported schooling difficulties said that their learning was enhanced when their teachers ‘broke the learning tasks into small steps; talking through and explaining work repeatedly’, using a variety of teaching methods, also ‘showing students methods of
organizing and remembering information’. Another noteworthy comment from the study highlights the issue of exemplary teaching for improved school learning, as follows:

When I first started Year 12, I didn’t think that my writing and everything was up to the ‘standards’, but like the teachers sort of said to me like... this is what we want, and yeah. Like when we’re in class and when they explain stuff, I don’t understand it because of the words and especially at the start of Year 12, I was all nervous and I didn’t know what they were talking about, but they [teachers] always help me and lead the way, and yeah. Like I’m not embarrassed to say ‘can you help me’, but sometimes I’m not in the mood so I don’t ask and they kind of know that there's something wrong, so they come and help me anyway. (Rahman, 2010b, p. 213)

Similar research by McDonald (2003) draws from interviews with Indigenous students and their families in an urban secondary school in the Northern Territory, to investigate the exemplary practices of a particular teacher working effectively with his Indigenous students. In the study, the teacher had been successful in getting his students to participate in oral assessment presentations, while other teachers within the school had faced challenges. McDonald found that the teacher had developed a culturally appropriate teaching plan to successfully engage his Indigenous students in the activity. The teacher made time in and out of class to assist students with their presentation and provided them with regular feedback on their work and opportunities to practise in front of smaller groups to help build up their skills and confidences. Only when the teacher felt that they were prepared and ready, were the students actually assessed on the activity. This teacher was successful in his teaching practices, which had a positive result on the students’ learning and achievement.

Rahman (2010a, 2010b), Harrison (2004, 2008) and others argue that the possession of school cultural knowledge, such as students learning the codes and requirements of school success, and effective teaching techniques are important for Indigenous students being able to reach levels of success in mainstream schooling. The study by Rahman (2010b) is effective in highlighting the students’ benefits associated with explicit teaching, including improved subject engagement. As argued by Rahman (2010b, p. 106), ‘when students are familiar with the goals, standards and expectations for learning, they are better able to negotiate their success in school’.

**Indigenous student learning**

The domination of Western culture in Australian education has largely shaped Indigenous people’s expectations and schooling outcomes. As a result of this situation, many Aboriginal children have had to relinquish their distinct ways of learning and abandon their cultural heritage, in order to receive a formal education. Harrison (2008, p. 113) argues that ‘most kids want to be understood and they want the things they recognize in themselves to be recognized by others’. However, as pointed out by Mooney and Craven (2005), Aboriginal people have not and still do not have sufficient power to control or change the cultural messages and dimensions of mainstream education. In recent years, Indigenous Australians have argued for their right to access an education that meets both their personal and cultural needs (Herbert, 2002).
The language and cultural practices of the family, which are taught to students from birth, is what students come to identify and shapes their understandings of themselves, others, and their understandings of the world. At home, Indigenous children are often expected to be fairly independent in their day-to-day activities, and rely very much on their own observations to learn new things, which can often conflict with school structure and expectations. Hughes, More and Williams (2004) point out that Indigenous students at home often learn through their actions and suffer the consequences of bad decisions. However, as said by Harrison (2008), when they go to school, their lives are usually constantly monitored and organised, they are disciplined by the teacher, and teacher permission is usually required for actions like getting up from their seat, speaking, and going to the toilet. Pace and Hemmings (2007, p. 4) argue that ‘authority is a fundamental, problematic, and poorly understood component of classroom life...involving ongoing negotiations between teachers and students influenced by numerous and often conflicting institutional, cultural and societal factors’ (Metz, cited in Pace and Hemmings, 2007, p. 5). Malcolm, Kessaris and Hunter (2003, p. 92) encapsulate this very dilemma by explaining that ‘the use of language in school settings can be fundamentally at odds with the lives of both urban and remote Aboriginal communities’. This is because many Indigenous students have grown up not speaking Standard English, and that the Australian school system ‘operates within a system of communication that is suited to a life in a white Australian context’ (Malcolm et al., 2003, p. 93). Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. 26) argue that:

...teachers who are knowledgeable about their students’ family lives are better prepared to understand the children’s in-school behaviour, and to incorporate into classroom activities the ‘funds of knowledge’ those families possess.

Without having this insight, teachers may not be able to cross the cultural boundaries and develop deep understandings on how culture and language play an important role in the learning outcomes of students (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008, 2009; Rahman, 2010a). The study by Rahman (2010a, 2010b) emphasises that the interactions that Indigenous students have with their teachers can be a critical factor for student performance and achievement. The following quote of a Year 12 student interviewed as part of Rahman’s (2010b) study is indicative of this, and highlights how teacher understanding and support assisted the student in his schooling, during a personally difficult time, as follows:

Like last term I don’t know how I went with my report ’cos I had lots of trouble with family business and then my uncle passed away...and this all happened in the last two weeks and I just had bits and pieces handed up. But they knew...but yeah, they were really good. They just said you know...all my stuff can just be moderated at the end of the year, which is really good. But there’s a few things that have been done this term...but they’re pretty good like that. (Rahman, 2010b, p. 82)

There is also a responsibility on the part of the school to detect and change the hidden structures of education that work to produce educational inequalities and undermine student achievement. Students need to be provided with varying learning opportunities and equitable assessments that take into consideration their preferred ways of learning, and their experiences, perspectives, and worldviews. Nielsen, Nicol and Owuor (2008, p. 37) argue more specifically that ‘curricula and pedagogy need to
be respectful of and responsive to students’ traditional cultures and ways of coming to know about the culture, its knowledge structures and its practices. It is in the view of Vang (2006, p. 25) that the curriculum which schools provide ‘should bridge the knowledge and experiences students have with the knowledge and experiences they need to acquire’, but that it should not be done at the expense of their cultural heritage, language and identity.

In Canada, Barnhardt and Kawagley (2005) discuss the restrictive nature of formal education for Inuit and Alaskan Native students, and emphasise the need to develop new approaches to better engage Indigenous students with school, including that of bi-cultural education. In Australia, Watego (2005) and Matthews, Watego, Cooper and Baturo (2005) collectively discuss learning ‘contextualization’, which involves incorporating aspects of Indigenous culture and perspectives into school pedagogical approaches, with the aim of improving Indigenous student learning engagement. This type of converging education empowers Indigenous students academically, and has the potential to pave the way for improved schooling outcomes. This is because the learning reinforces their home cultures and provides them with educational relevance. As Gay (2002, p. 106) argues, ‘when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly’. An important aim of contextualized learning is to enable students to become fluent in a multitude of ways of knowing, to become competent in Western culture as well as their home culture, through the process of bridging Indigenous and Western ontologies.

Matthews et al. (2005) discuss contextualisation in relation to mathematics education for Australian Indigenous students. They provide an example of a Yolngu community school in Yirrkala, in northern Australia, successfully using Western mathematics and Yolngu mathematics alongside each other. In the Garma mathematics class, Indigenous worldviews and student knowledge of Indigenous kinship systems and patterns were connected with Western mathematical notions; the practice resulted in the students engaging successfully with the learning. Fleer (2008) and Jorgensen, Grootenboera, Nieschea and Lerman (2010) express a similar argument that pedagogy and curriculum can seek to find meaning for Western education concepts, by teachers using them within Indigenous practice traditions and worldviews. These discussions on competing worldviews not only helped students to develop knowledge on Western education, but students could draw from their own cultural knowledge and understandings, which also encouraged their critical thinking and resulted in more effective subject engagement (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Howard and Perry (2007, pp. 402–403) argue that Indigenous students ‘need to feel that schools belong to them as much as any child’ and that to ‘move towards the achievement of potential of Aboriginal students, it is important that Aboriginal culture and language are accepted in the classroom’. Bevan-Brown (2005) and Matthews, Howard and Perry (2003) agree that the inclusion of cultural content in classrooms not only develops Indigenous students’ pride in their culture, but it allows for cultural abilities and talents to surface and be identified, and learning outcomes to be improved. Brayboy and Castagno (2009), in their review of the research literature on culturally responsive schooling (CRS), highlight some examples of exemplary CRS programs that have been developed and implemented for Indigenous
youth in the United States, resulting in improved schooling outcomes. In particular, they make mention of the Rock Point and Rough Rock community schools on the Navajo reserve, as schools that have resisted conventional schooling. By experimenting with CRS in the local Native language, the efforts of these schools resulted in improved levels of student academic achievement, pride and confidence. All examples of successful CRS schools indicated in the review of Brayboy and Castagno (2009, p. 47) ‘point to the importance of contextualizing or localizing curriculum and pedagogy so that it bears some connection and resemblance to the knowledge and learning of the local community’, to better engage Indigenous students in school learning.

A recent study by Kanu (2007) examines the effects of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum, on Aboriginal student achievement in Canada. The research was conducted over a one-year period in a Canadian secondary school, using classroom observations and interviews with two teachers and 31 Aboriginal students in two Grade 9 Social Studies classrooms. The study was designed to compare two classrooms, one that was culturally enriched with Aboriginal perspectives, content and resources and responsive to Aboriginal student needs, whilst the other was not. The findings indicated that making classroom curriculum and structures more culturally compatible and in line with the home cultures of students resulted in successful school outcomes for students who were part of the culturally enriched classroom. These students performed dramatically better in Social Studies tests and exams, compared with students in the regular class, and were also more engaged in the subject learning, and had improved self-confidence and higher cognitive skills.

In the US in the last decade, there have been greater levels of commitment to culturally responsive schooling resulting in the incorporation of a bi-cultural curriculum in many community schools to affect improved student performance (Brayboy & Castagno, 2008). Culturally responsive schooling efforts aim to address some of the learning incongruities, by developing students as bi-cultural learners who are both competent and knowledgeable in both the mainstream culture and their home culture. Research by Lee (2009), in the US, has found that Native American youth understand the importance of retaining their cultural and linguistic competency for cultural sustainability, as well as the importance of acquiring Western education for improving their life outcomes, including job security. Aboriginal families generally want their children to able to ‘walk tall’ in both cultures, but retain their identity and culture as their first priority (Malin & Maidment, 2003).

Children need opportunities in school that allow them to grow in both their primary culture as well as the dominant culture, and to learn skills that enable them to negotiate between their home culture and the majority culture. Students who learn as part of a culturally responsive school environment are exposed to culturally supportive and compatible teaching methods, as well as instructions and materials, all of which build on the knowledge, skills and strengths which they bring to school. Students learn to become active and independent learners in school, and develop skills that enable them to think critically and analytically about information presented to them. For example, Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. 29) explain that culturally responsive schooling helps students to ‘interrogate the curriculum critically by having them address inaccuracies, omissions and distortions in the text, and by broadening it to include multiple perspectives’. However, culturally responsive schooling is not only about schools displaying cultural respect, sensitivity and value,
but it is also about schools believing in the academic potential of their students, holding high expectations of them for their schooling, and ensuring that these expectations are realised (Gay, 2000, 2002).

Conclusion
The hidden curriculum is what all students come to experience as part of their schooling, and this largely influences their academic outcomes of the school. Whilst it can be said that some students come to school with a reservoir of cultural knowledge and resources, enabling their success in education, it is often those students who don’t have the cultural match-ups that schooling requires, that get left behind in their education. For many Indigenous students and their families, the cultural and social knowledge of how to succeed in school, is not usually present (Watego, 2005). This is because the cultural knowledge and practices that the children have grown up with that seem a natural and normal part of family and community life, become disabling mainstream education processes. The students who succeed and do well in school have usually learnt to play the game well; they come to understand the discipline of school, the learning in all its manifestations, and the codes needed to succeed educationally. This knowledge is not specifically taught to students; it forms part of the hidden curriculum and students learn it through their education.

When students acquire knowledge of school culture, they learn how the school operates and ways to effectively negotiate their success in school. The inflexibility of mainstream education structures to accommodate the alternative experiences of Indigenous students has done little to improve the overall outcomes in Indigenous education. Emerging approaches in education, including that of learning ‘contextualization’, are becoming effective in engaging Indigenous students with mainstream education, through the process of linking Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. Aboriginal students have the right (like all other students) to feel that they are valued and have a meaningful place within their school, and that the education they are provided with accommodates their cultural, personal and academic needs.

References


