

Building Teacher Confidence Through ‘Storywork’: Exploring the Power of the Arts in Classrooms

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Abstract

Arts integration in core learning domains has long been acknowledged as an engaging and effective pedagogical approach. Creative activities encourage students to take risks, make mistakes, and consider alternative perspectives, promoting curiosity and developing problem-solving capacity. Arts integration is valuable in classrooms also for sensitively addressing complex issues related to identity, race, and culture. Yet, despite the numerous academic and social benefits of the arts, contemporary neo-liberal constraints are gradually diminishing funding for arts-based practices in Australia. Using an interpretive, contextualized qualitative methodology based on Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), we present research findings showcasing examples provided by Indigenous experts on the potential of arts-based practices in schools. Our Indigenous Storywork demonstrates how, through an arts-based approach, a more profound appreciation of Indigenous culture and history can create an inclusive learning environment that considers local protocols and values.

Introduction

In Australia, it is mandatory to include the study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ Histories and Cultures under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross-Curriculum Priority (CPP) (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.). However, there continues to be limited focus on specific strategies to guide and nurture teachers' confidence towards teaching First Nations perspectives to ensure an ethical and engaging approach (Riley & Pidgeon, 2019). A growing body of research illustrates how arts-based pedagogies may promote cultural perspectives and intercultural understanding while respecting local cultures and traditions (Monk et al., 2023). Yet, despite this potential, many teachers lack confidence in integrating arts-based pedagogies into their practice in culturally appropriate ways (Han, 2019).

Responding to the CPP imperative to embed First Nations knowledge and perspectives in schools respectfully and ethically, we draw upon the expertise of national and international First Nations experts (IE) who have used arts-based pedagogies to integrate First Nations perspectives in their classrooms in ways that are culturally appropriate and adaptable to diverse communities and contexts. This research is part of a larger project called Weaving Stories of Strength (WSS) (Meston et al., 2024; Riley et al., 2024), which models embedding First Nations expertise throughout the curriculum. This paper focuses on the findings from five of the initial 16 experts interviewed, three of who told illustrative stories of how First Nations educators successfully used arts-based inquiry and pedagogies to teach students in ethically and culturally appropriate ways.

Writing from Meanjin (Brisbane, Australia) on the lands of the Yuggera and Turrbal Peoples, we are a multidisciplinary team of First Nations and non-Indigenous researchers guided by First Nations researchers. The first and second authors are non-Indigenous scholars from Canada and Australia, specialising in diversity and arts-based education and research. The third author is a Gamilaroi scholar investigating the intersections between culture, art, and

¹ The collective nouns used to name the world's tribal groups have become increasingly problematic, as they are often derogatory, historically inaccurate and contaminated by a colonial past (Peters & Mika, 2017). While governments worldwide still use the terms "Aborigine" and "Indigenous," there is opposition by different tribes and First Nations peoples to those terms. In legal circles, notably in Canada, the term "First Nations" is becoming more popular, although it is also frequently mentioned as referring to members of recognised reserve communities. Most First Peoples prefer to be named or referred to by their specific nation, language group, tribe or clan names (Peters & Mika, 2017). In Australia, where we write, preference is for using the nation or language group affiliation. However, it is often beyond the scope of academic work to refer specifically to many different nations in the text due to word limitations or the need to de-identify participants. In this case, there is a secondary preference to refer to the distinct groupings of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples when research relates to groups of distinct First Peoples in the first mention in the text, thereafter shortening the attribution to Indigenous peoples or First Nations peoples. As our research engages First Nations peoples from Canada, Aotearoa, the United States and Australia, we use the term First Nations for its growing acceptance internationally.

technology. Together, we have co-taught an Indigenous education course to pre-service teacher educators at a university in Queensland, Australia. We have seen first-hand the effectiveness of using arts-based practices to integrate First Nations perspectives in powerful and meaningful ways.

Using Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), a First Nations research methodology, we analyse our five experts' stories to identify four key learnings. These learnings are, a) going beyond the stereotypes, b) consolidating complex ideas via symbols, c) using the arts to teach 'Country' through cultural appreciation, not appropriation, and d) illustrating the concept of belonging through arts and land-based pedagogies, which can be adapted to local classroom practice. We first provide a brief illustration of the background context of arts education in Australia, then outline the methodology of gathering and analysing the interviews in ways that align with Storywork methodological practices. Finally, we discuss further implications for research and practice.

Integrating First Nations Perspectives Through Ethical Arts-Based Pedagogies

In considering the importance of arts in cultivating cultural perspectives, researchers have demonstrated how the arts help cultivate a nuanced appreciation of cultural perspectives and facilitate emotional connections with others (Moore & Baker, 2019; Meston et al., 2024). The arts can serve as a medium that brings people closer together, which is vital for society's growth and development (Chung & Li, 2020; Desai, 2020), and can highlight our interconnectedness within social structures that recognise or marginalise our experiences (Monk et al., 2023). Teachers have utilised arts-based teaching methods to help students enhance their visual literacy skills and think critically about how different cultures are portrayed (Barton et al., 2021; McCarthy, 2018). With these skills, students can determine whether images are culturally appropriate or if they perpetuate damaging cultural stereotypes or superficial interpretations (Han, 2019). When educators incorporate students' cultures and communities into the curriculum, students become more engaged in learning (Hunter-Doniger, 2018). Another way to encourage students to think critically about cultural representations is to include diverse perspectives, including those of First Nations peoples, in the curriculum. This provides a platform for voices marginalised or excluded from historical texts (Riley & Pidgeon, 2019).

Although the potential of arts-based practices to enhance students' critical thinking and empathy towards issues related to Indigeneity has been recognised, challenges remain when it comes to integrating Indigenous perspectives throughout the curriculum. For example, there is limited information regarding concrete strategies that provide teachers with the skills to integrate First Nations perspectives effectively in culturally appropriate ways (Morton-Robinson et al., 2012; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). Additionally, the emphasis on literacy,

numeracy, and science in schools as part of the neoliberal agenda has devalued arts education (Kerby et al., 2021) leading to reduced funding (Nantsou, 2023), a shift towards generalist teachers (Russell-Bowie, 2015), and a lack of confidence among teachers in their artistic abilities (Alter et al., 2009; Eddles-Hirsch, 2017). Consequently, inappropriate assumptions about First Nations peoples persist in classroom content and arts-based activities, leading to misunderstandings of First Nations culture, traditions, and protocols (Baynes, 2016; Hradisky & Forgasz, 2023).

While many non-Indigenous teachers understand the importance of ethically integrating Indigenous pedagogies into their curriculum, they also fear misappropriating First Nations cultures, art, and traditions. This is a legitimate concern that needs to be addressed (Carroll et al., 2020). The misappropriation of First Nations art, histories, and cultural practices has long been documented in art, research, and education (Acuff, 2018; Haig-Brown, 2010; Keene et al., 2023). Cultural appropriation refers to adopting elements of a person's culture without permission (Heyd, 2003). Art appropriation involves the “direct duplication, copying or incorporation of an image”, which changes its meaning and raises questions about authenticity (Stangos, 1994, p.19). It is particularly egregious when the appropriated art is from marginalised groups (Howard, 2020; Lalonde, 2021).

Understanding how to use arts-based pedagogies ethically to integrate First Nations perspectives is a crucial practice that requires educators to be mindful of local First Nations ethics and protocols. When teaching about First Nations cultural practices or concepts, teachers must be acutely aware of their actions and how they present information to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or revealing cultural information, practices, or art that could be seen as inappropriate or disrespectful towards First Nations communities' protocols and values (United Nations, 2007). As Cherokee Nation researcher Adrienne Keene (2016) proposes, to avoid cultural appropriation, teachers should engage with modern-day First Nations peoples and interact with the communities on whose land their schools are located. She contends that by seeing Indigenous peoples as contemporary, teachers can “recognise why the misuse and appropriation of First Nations materials and ideas are harmful and often rooted in stereotypes” (p.56).

Engagement with First Nations communities in schools is vital as it can help to minimise cultural appropriation and misuse of First Nations practices and promote specificity in teaching First Nations perspectives. For example, in a Ngalangangpum school in remote Western Australia, St John and Edwards-Vandenhoeck (2022) describe how Elders and Gija artists collaborated with First Nations students in aspects of art making. Students participated in arts relevant to traditional community practices. They could present their design outcomes on “t-shirts, AFL jerseys, iPhone covers, animations, and zines” (p. 101) in contemporary

ways that benefited the students and the local First Nations community, revitalising the prospects of the community art centre. Bulliwana et al. (2019, p. 74) demonstrated how Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers could use arts-based practices to demonstrate ‘both ways’ pedagogy. This approach emphasises learning from one another, incorporating First Nations and non-Indigenous values. The program facilitators provided arts-based inquiry practices that enabled the participants to reflect on their learning through symbol-making and art.

Finally, scholars such as Meston et al. (2023), Byrne and Munns (2012), and Bissett (2012) showcased how the integration of culture and art can be used as a stimulus for learning novel 21st-century technologies through interactive games, animation, and arts-based inquiry, stimulating meta-cognitive reflection among learners. For example, Bissett (2012) demonstrated how the digital rendering of stories and songs of Country through computer technology can engage First Nations learners (p. 88) yet could also be used within mainstream classrooms to facilitate appreciation of First Nations perspectives amongst non-Indigenous students. These examples demonstrate how teachers can eradicate the invisibility of First Nations peoples and encourage specificity in teaching First Nations perspectives.

While non-Indigenous teachers must research their local First Nations community to ensure their practices are mindful of regional and traditional customs and protocols (Han, 2019), we also contend that teachers can learn by example from First Nations scholars, who are already using art-based pedagogies to ethically integrate First Nations perspectives into teaching relevant to local communities.

The following section discusses the Indigenous Method of Storywork. We illustrate findings from First Nations experts highlighting the potential of arts integration in classrooms, synthesised to generate teacher confidence to explore the power of First Nations arts-based practices.

Methodology

This study explores successful strategies for ethically integrating First Nations perspectives and arts-based pedagogies throughout the curriculum, as recommended and implemented by national and international First Nations Experts (IE) in education. This research stems from a larger project (Riley et al., 2024) that draws upon academic literature and expert knowledge in First Nations education to develop a novel model for embedding First Nations expertise throughout the curriculum. The project sought guidance from experienced First Nations educationalists who held, or continue to hold, leadership positions within educational institutions and have significant experience teaching using First Nations approaches at the state/provincial or tertiary level.

For the initial project, 16 First Nations Experts (FNE) from Australia (6), Canada (7), Aotearoa (New Zealand) (2), and the United States (1) were interviewed. We used a yarning methodology (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2020; Fredericks et al., 2011) to understand better pedagogical strategies for teaching First Nations issues in predominately Eurocentric settings. We followed the principles of First Nations methodologies (Kovach, 2010). We employed Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) Four Rs framework, which comprises respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity, as an overarching tool to ethically guide our research practice. We also used Indigenous qualitative content analysis (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021) to gather, organise, and analyse our findings. This paper focuses on findings from five of the 16 experts interviewed in the initial project due to their specific reference to the arts and arts-based practices.

Of the five IE focused here, two FNE are from Canada (IE 4, 6), one FNE is from Australia (FNE 5), and one FNE identifies as Māori (FNE13) and has experience teaching in New Zealand and Canada. Among these five FNEs, three shared stories illustrating how they have used arts-based pedagogy methods to impart ethical teaching in culturally appropriate ways. By analysing our five experts' findings, we identified four key learnings educators can adopt in their local practices. Following the (w)holistic framework of Mikmaq scholar Michelle Pidgeon (2016), this paper examines the practices of these five experts, highlighting aspects that can be easily adapted to meet the diverse needs and contexts of schools and communities throughout Australia.

Our research explored the concept of Indigenous methodologies (IM) empowering Indigenous communities to reclaim traditional knowledge and practices while engaging with contemporary research paradigms (Kovach, 2010; Pidgeon, 2018; Rigney, 1999; Smith, 2012). Such scholars have explained the potency of IM, which derives from its alignment with First Nations worldviews and cultural practices. Relational accountability is a crucial aspect of IM that involves understanding how individual knowledge systems interact with the whole and how humans express themselves about different forms of knowledge (Datta, 2018). First Nations research methodologies were vital to this research's ethical conduct and translation.

First Nations scholars recognise storytelling as a powerful and legitimate research method for knowing and sharing knowledge in a way that embodies the emotional impact of the experience (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2010). Sto:llo Nation scholar Jo Ann Archibald (2008) describes this process as "Storywork." According to her, "the words story and work together signal the importance and seriousness of undertaking the educational and research work of making meaning through stories, whether they are traditional or lived experience stories" (p. 373). Storywork entails respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, (w)holism,

interrelatedness, and synergy. The Storywork process enables knowledge holders to maintain control over the knowledge they wish to share while also allowing them to question how their knowledge is received and how it might be shared with others.

We utilised Storywork methodology to explore arts-based discussions and allow experts to control what information is shared and how it is shared. This approach follows the seven principles of respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, (w)holism, interrelatedness, and synergy outlined by Archibald (2008). Our process was iterative and reflective, involving listening, reading, and re-reading stories from First Nations experts. Through the WSS project, our research team paid close attention to the context of the stories and the emotions and impact conveyed. We ensured the First Nations experts could maintain control over their knowledge, and we were respectful and responsible when using the stories. All experts were granted access to their transcripts and could review and amend them as they preferred. They could also choose to be identified with the knowledge they shared, remain anonymous, or remain anonymous with self-selected pseudonyms. All the experts remained anonymous, and no pseudonyms were provided; therefore, we respected our experts' decisions. We informed them about the purpose of sharing their knowledge with others and how it would be used, thus maintaining a reciprocal relationship.

Archibald (2008) states, "Effective story work grows from the actions of interdependence and synergy formed by the storyteller, the story, the listener, and the context in which the story is used" (p. 378). At times, the knowledge holder may provide guidance, information, and strategies through means of a story, and thus, "research as storytelling" describes the process of relaying "life experience stories to exemplify leadership" (p. 377). We aimed to identify fundamental principles within these stories that could inform the ethical integration of First Nations perspectives and arts-based inquiry and pedagogies in the curriculum. Using Storywork methodology, we grounded our research process in First Nations knowledge systems and cultural practices.

We provide examples of the culturally responsive arts-based techniques and strategies five First Nations experts used in their teaching practice. These examples address four main topics: a) going beyond stereotypes, b) consolidating complex ideas via symbols, c) using the arts to teach "Country" through cultural appreciation, not appropriation, d) illustrating the concept of belonging through arts and land-based pedagogies.

The interviewers' questions were designed to elicit such stories, and guidance was found within the stories. First Nations experts dictated the direction of the conversations throughout, which led to rich illustrations suggesting ethical approaches to arts practice through a First Nations lens.

Findings

Arts-based pedagogy helps transition between superficial and meaning-infused approaches to appreciating First Nations art forms, artworks, and artists. Our interviews with First Nations education experts revealed how they used art-based pedagogies to gently guide their students towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of First Nations cultures and histories. This approach means they were able to provide more salient opportunities for students to reflect on their cultural background and identity and consider how it intersects with historical events from First Nations points of view, as shown through the following themes.

A) Going Beyond Stereotypes

As Keene (2016) contends, “Many of the problems of cultural appropriation occur because of the sheer invisibility of Native peoples”; however, she proposes that this can be dramatically eliminated “when the experiences of learning about and with First Nations communities in schools are crafted more carefully, deliberately, and with the input of local communities” (p. 57). Our experts agreed. One First Nations expert (FNE5) discussed the critical difference between what she termed as ‘light’ and ‘deep’ approaches to teaching First Nations education through an example involving an arts-based activity revolving around the creation of button blankets, a ceremonial wool blanket created by Northwest coastal tribes of Canada. She states,

West Coast uses many button blankets, so they [teachers] make button blankets. However, it is just an art activity versus having an Elder come in and share a story about what the button blanket means, what the animal symbols on those blankets mean, and what it meant to have the abalone shell collected and made into buttons. All those rich cultural teachings that go with it. You can go Indigenous light or deep; we are trying to move our teachers away from this light performative piece to this deeper piece.

The expert suggests that it is vital to move away from performative art activities that may reinforce stereotypes and assumptions about First Nations peoples if not done carefully. Instead, she encourages teachers to adopt a “deep approach” where educators take the time to research and connect with local First Nations artists who can provide students with a comprehensive understanding of First Nations knowledges. This approach cultivates what First Nations expert 6 describes as “knowledge dexterity,” enabling students to “discern when certain forms of knowledge are more appropriate than others” and “apply different ways of working with knowledge based on what is in front of them.”

In the following interviews, three First Nations experts describe how they use the arts to facilitate cultural appreciation of First Nations concepts and values such as respect, Country, and belonging in their institutions.

B) Teaching Respect Through Community and Consolidating Complex Ideas via Symbols

The importance of protocols and terminology when understanding, practising, or being involved with First Nations education through the arts is paramount and must be respected as a natural function of abiding by culturally responsive ethical and holistic teaching practices. First Nations protocols and terminology refer to the diverse and locally specific cultural and social customs, principles, phrases, and words teachers and schools should learn from First Nations knowledge holders. A crucial component of culturally responsive and ethical teaching practice, collaboration with local First Nations artists and communities helps align practices with local values and concerns. Teachers and schools must acknowledge the critical impact of First Nations expertise to provide respectful and holistic education to learners.

The following example provided by a First Nations expert (FNE6) from Canada illustrates collaboration with local First Nations communities around art and uses symbolism to express complex ideas to students. His pedagogical approach foregrounds meaningfulness by using symbols (which may permeate various First Nations art forms) to explore several aspects of meaning explicitly. As a high school teacher, he studied the symbol systems of the local Blackfoot community, then collaborated with local Elders to ensure his teaching of symbols was accurate and respectful of community protocols. He states,

We got them [students] thinking about these [things that Elders taught]. We looked at some examples. And then, the students' task was to identify the 15 most important events in Blackfoot history based on [their] research, consultation, and chats. They then had to create symbols for each event they identified. They could not be random. They had to have some foundation to them. And then we put on robes. So, that was a great experience and took much time in terms of energy and all that, but it was worth it.

After doing this with the Elders, he describes how he adapted the activity for students' classroom learning, stating,

Now, I ask my students to create a symbol for every week of our course. The symbol represents what was most meaningful for them that week. I try to be clear with them that it can be anything. It could be something I said in passing. It could be something that a classmate said. It could be a word you say in an article I asked you to read.

Whatever it is, that is the most meaningful thing, and they must figure out a way to create a symbol to represent that meaningfulness.

In this case, the First Nations expert uses arts-based pedagogy by encouraging students to create symbols of their learning experiences rather than simply writing about them. This approach taps into students' creative sides and allows them to express themselves in ways that go beyond traditional writing assignments. Additionally, the teacher incorporates First Nations knowledge by valuing symbols' importance in First Nations cultures. Symbols have been used for centuries in First Nations cultures to convey complex ideas and concepts, and by asking students to create symbols to represent their learning experiences, the teacher is recognising and honouring this tradition and reiterating the information they learned from Elders in the prior land-based activity. However, the expert does not end there; he notes how students have a “compilation of symbols” by the end of the course. At this point, he invites them to “write a story that expresses and shares their experience in the course.” He describes how the students “use the symbols to tell the story of the course from [their] point of view.” He states, “Some students have created children’s books out of these where they put the symbols in the middle, and the story flows around it. They are great. Creative.”

By encouraging students to use symbols to express their experiences and knowledge gained from the course, the expert creates a space for students to engage in creative and reflective practices. This approach recognises the importance of story-telling and visual representation in First Nations cultures and demonstrates how these practices can be integrated into contemporary educational settings. The expert’s emphasis on student-centred and participatory learning allows diverse perspectives and voices to be heard and valued. Additionally, it promotes another First Nations value: the students could share their books with Elders or youth within the community. Overall, the expert’s approach fosters a deeper understanding of First Nations knowledge systems and the role of arts-based pedagogies in education.

C) Using the Arts to Teach “Country” Through Cultural Appreciation, Not Appropriation

Cultural appropriation refers to the act of adapting or adopting elements of a person's culture without their permission (Heyd, 2003), while art appropriation is the “direct duplication, copying or incorporation of an image” which “changes its meaning and questioning notions of originality and authenticity” (Stangos, 1994, p. 19). Cultural and art appropriation remains a contentious issue, particularly when the appropriated group is marginalised (Lalonde, 2021). As Gamilaraay, graphic artist of Mirii Designs, states,

Cultural appropriation is detrimental to all progress in reviving and keeping the culture alive. When an Indigenous person is not consulted or has not created that

art, it lacks true authenticity and damages the cultural identity of the Indigenous people. It is not only disrespectful for the Indigenous community but also in a broader level the misappropriation may show the Indigenous culture for only one part and not its deep rich and surviving heritage (Hoger, 2022).

Educators' "discomfort in appropriating First Nations cultures and traditions is a real emotion and concern" that needs to be addressed (Carroll et al., 2020, p.13). Such concern is not unfounded, as the misappropriation of First Nations art, histories, and cultural practices has been highlighted in research, advertising, art, and education (Prazmowska-Marcinowska, 2020). When teaching about First Nations cultural practices or concepts, teachers must be acutely aware of their actions and how they present information to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or revealing cultural information, practices, or art that could be seen as inappropriate or disrespectful towards First Nations communities' protocol and values.

In the following example, a First Nations expert (FNE5) from Australia describes how he uses the arts to extend his students' thinking about 'Country' and belonging while illustrating the nuances between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. According to Thorpe (2022), the term 'Country' is a multifaceted concept that refers to "the land as a living entity". It encompasses both 'human and non-human' environmental elements associated with a specific location's natural and spiritual phenomena (p. 56). For Murri scholar Bronwyn Fredericks (2013), "Country" refers to the "knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that [...] particular Indigenous place" (p. 6). For many First Nations peoples worldwide (Burgess et al., 2022; Styres, 2017), living and learning on 'Land' or 'Country' is a top priority because "the land itself both directly teaches and guides the process of learning" (van Gelderen, 2017, p. 15). However, one expert explains how teachers sometimes hesitate to use art to explore the concept of Country as they fear culturally appropriating First Nations culture, stating,

When people say, "*Oh, I want to create a song and a dance. I wanna dance and sing the country*". Now, if you did it in such a way that you are using our old songs and dances and doing them without the proper Song Man and Song Women and proper dancing, you will be guilty of cultural appropriation. Yeah, so do not do that. However, creating your songs and dance and using them as a medium to communicate learning belongs to everyone. Aboriginal people do not have an embargo on that. We have an assessment piece where students are asked to create a song and dance for Country. We do this to demonstrate how to use non-rational processes to get knowledge across through movement, kinesthetic learning, song, music, etc. Some students get really, "*Well, hang on. This is Black Fella stuff. You know this is this cultural appropriation.*" No, it is not.

To circumvent their fear, our expert demonstrates how he differentiates cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation to his students in his teaching, explaining,

If you have formed a connection with your place, which has made you want to sing, dance, and create, that is **not** cultural appropriation. If, however, you saw an Aboriginal song and dance about this Country and were inspired by it and said I am going to recreate that song and dance for my kids, that **is** cultural appropriation.

This expert suggests that teachers should encourage students to create artwork based on their interpretation of a feeling or a concept, which helps illustrate their sense of belonging to land and community. Through such activities, students can learn and appreciate differences in terms of cultural histories and backgrounds while connecting and identifying feelings of loss, belonging, and connection. Monk et al. (2023) state, “Arts allow us to empathise with others and reveal to us how others experience the world, reminding us that we are social beings living within social institutions that acknowledge our situated knowledge or marginalise it” (p. 10). Arts-based practices increase students' capacity to learn, understand, and appreciate the value different cultures and perspectives can bring (Han, 2019), thus promoting the concept of reciprocity and intercultural understanding.

Just as the land can be regarded as a provocation for an artistic response to evocative concepts, local, national, and international First Nations artists can evoke critical discussion, debate and reflection while providing a platform for voices frequently marginalised or omitted from history texts. For example, the work of First Nations artist Gordon Bennett could be effectively drawn on by teachers to help students challenge stereotypes and critically reflect on identity and belonging. Bennett's (1989) work *Untitled (dismay, displace, disperse, dispirit, display, dismiss)* draws on word and image to “... explore language as a tool with which the colonisers of Australia subjugated the country's original inhabitants” (Museum of Contemporary Art, n.d., para. 1).

Teachers can facilitate rich and appropriate discussions with students about sensitive topics through this artwork. Students can be encouraged to respond by creating their pieces inspired by Bennett's art techniques and conventions. In such activities, art is used to either express strong emotions, feelings, or ideas related to diversity and inclusivity about concepts of Country, land, ownership, and belonging or to provoke a response, all of which are crucial for cultivating an educational environment that values equity and social justice (Butterwick & Roy, 2018) in alignment with First Nations values and concerns (Rallis et al., 2024).

D) Illustrating the Concept of Belonging Through Arts and Land-Based Pedagogies

One way to help students build knowledge dexterity is by involving them in the learning process. One First Nations expert (FNE13) describes her approach of using art, metaphor, and symbols to help pre-service teachers think more critically about their cultural background (Riley et al. under review). She models how she does this by presenting a drawing she created, which provides the viewer with a visual interpretation of her cultural background. She discusses how she unpacks with students the symbolism of each image she has used to describe her cultural heritage in Aotearoa (New Zealand). After demonstrating this exercise to her students, she invites them to do the same for her as an act of reciprocity and mutual respect. In another exercise, she encourages students to use land and arts-based pedagogies to create something that helps illustrate their understanding of what they learned in class. She invites them to think about their environment and to utilise the land and the ocean to create something. She elaborates,

[The students] must think about those theoretical and philosophical principles and understand what they are doing. It does not matter if they are making a blanket. Tell us your story. They must *understand* their model. They must be able to apply that model once they understand it and analyse the completion of that whole practice, from theory and practice to analogy, especially if they use it in their lesson plans. They get to exhibit their model for one week in our gallery. And then, of course, [we ask them] “*What was important? What did you learn?*” They then take that to their [future] students so that they will get to create whatever they learn and share that and transform their learning. (FNE13)

The work of FNE13 highlights the significance of theoretical and philosophical principles in the practical application and analysis of the arts. By emphasising the importance of understanding one’s model and the ability to explain and exhibit it to others, FNE13 encourages the transformation of learning and perspectives. Providing opportunities for students to showcase their work allows for reflection, knowledge sharing, and a meaningful contextualisation of learning. This approach, characterised by critical thinking, is instrumental in promoting a deeper understanding of First Nations perspectives. As Walrath (2018) notes,

We meet and understand others through story and it is healing for all of us - the reader, the witness, and for the writer. Healing is not the same as curing a disease. It doesn’t involve surgery or taking a pill. Healing involves sharing stories with one another, seeing the world through the eyes of others, knowing them, loving them, and in the process actively changing the quality of all our lives (p.133).

FNE13’s approach towards facilitating intercultural understanding acknowledges the role of students’ lived experiences and aligns with Walrath’s emphasis on the power of storytelling

and the sharing of experiences to promote healing and reconciliation. By inviting students to create something that reflects their learning and cultural background, FNE14 allows her students to share their stories creatively. This ‘interwoven’ inquiry-based approach uses reflective arts-inquiry-based questions as a catalyst for critical thinking, promoting a more profound appreciation and interpretation of First Nations arts, culture, perspectives, and values while encouraging the development of empathy and respect towards different ways of knowing and being. Ultimately, the expert has used visual arts as a platform for learning, self-expression, and transformative education.

However, such processes need not be relegated to visual arts alone. Educators might encourage students to experiment with art forms such as photography, spoken word, or dance. Teachers may encourage students to use their bodies to illustrate feelings or emotions around a selected concept like belonging, inclusion, or reconciliation. Within Australia, educators seeking a culturally appropriate provocation might highlight the work of Bangarra Dance Theatre (n.d.), an Australian-based company of professional performers identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Various performances are available on their webpage (e.g., *Bennelong*; *Terrain*), and teachers can use these as a stimulus for conversations around topics such as colonisation, identity, belonging, and Country. However, it is essential to highlight that all teachers should aim to engage with artworks from their local First Nations communities. They provide invaluable opportunities for students to appreciate localised First Nations knowledges and cultures while engaging with topical issues.

These findings demonstrate how First Nations and art-based teaching practices can create authentic transformative learning opportunities for students, offering unique possibilities for creatively and innovatively connecting with local communities. In the first example, students were co-taught by teachers alongside First Nations Elders and artists who helped them understand the meaning and use of symbols sourced from local knowledge holders. Some students created children’s books using these symbols, which could catalyse peer-to-peer mentoring or tutoring opportunities around literacy learning.

In the second example, students used art forms such as music, song, and dance to illustrate their connection to the land and deepen their understanding of its significance to First Nations peoples. Educators could expand this lesson by organising a collective performance for the school or community, or by discussing the works of local First Nations artists in a student-led forum and how their works inspired deeper thinking around issues pertinent to the local community. Finally, in the third case study, students’ illustrations and land-based creations enabled students to consider their positioning within their local context. They could share and exhibit their creations and stories in a local gallery, gaining valuable insights into diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives from their peers. Teachers can create more ethical

activities by working with community or local First Nations artists to discuss the intention of their lesson and community endeavour and gain permission and suggestions before implementation (Han, 2019) while ensuring their students learn First Nations values about protocol, consultation, and reciprocity.

Conclusion

Educators are often required to learn content that may not be familiar to them; however, part of their duty is willingness to learn. The absence of this knowledge contributes to continued cycles of disadvantage and inequity, reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes about First Nations peoples or perpetuating misguided notions that First Nations cultural ways of knowing are irrelevant today (Sarra et al., 2020). Incorporating First Nations artists and their artworks in the learning and teaching experiences can help break the cycle of disadvantage and inequity while promoting diversity, inclusion, and appreciation for different cultures and perspectives.

A common thread among these approaches is their capacity to provide more meaningful and comprehensive insights by revealing First Nations culture's complexity, nuance, and holistic perspectives. Working collaboratively with local First Nations artists and communities can ensure teachers incorporate arts-based inquiry and practices into their classrooms that align with local values and concerns (Rallis et al., 2024). By becoming co-learners, teachers can model how mistakes can catalyse curiosity, new learnings, and alternative ways of seeing the world. In this way, they can impart learning skills such as problem-solving, team building, communication, and critical thinking through active dialogue, storytelling, and project- and inquiry-based learning (Bulliwana et al., 2019; Papp, 2020). By doing so, educators can provide more meaningful and comprehensive insights into First Nations cultures, reveal their complexity, nuances, and holistic perspectives, and challenge tokenised notions of Indigeniety, thus eradicating the detrimental impact of societal stereotypes and deficit thinking.

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