

Language and culture as ‘soul food’ for Aboriginal students’ education outcomes and identity

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In this presentation, notions of decolonisation are interrogated through a decolonising race theory (DRT) framework to shift conversations about Aboriginal students’ success beyond deficit. Discursive analysis of interviews with n=27 students highlights that while departmental and school policies are clear in relation to bullying and inclusive learning environments, much work is needed still to build better relationships on-the-ground and in-the-classroom focused on success. Despite a general reluctance to speak about negative experiences, thematic analysis of student interviews illuminated an interesting duality of being seen but not heard. While students perceived a general acceptance of culture generally by their schools / teachers / peers, they felt their identity as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander is questioned continuously or used as a basis to discriminate. Their collective voices stated clearly a desire to be treated fairly and equitably. Students’ voiced that dedicated Aboriginal spaces and cultural programs, combined better teaching practices – passionate, patience, clarity, connectivity, respectful, and humour – are keys to their educational success. The rigorous, culturally-responsive, critical research, and voices of Indigenous students themselves, presented in this symposium indicate that strategic planning and understanding to whole-of-education-sector approaches is urgently required to promote spaces and opportunities for Aboriginal students’ educational success as Aboriginal in Australia.