Thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine – I’m Dominique Russell.

In this episode of The Research Files podcast series we speak to Adjunct Professor of Curriculum and Pedagogy at James Cook University, Brian Lewthwaite. We have him on the line from Canada, where he is currently based in the role of program coordinator at the Yukon Native Teacher Education Program. He's been working on a four phase study centred on Indigenous perspectives of quality teaching in Australia, and joins us today to talk about phase one of this study. This included speaking to 30 teachers, 30 high school-aged students and 30 parents across approximately 12 schools, about what quality teacher practice is for them.

Dominique Russell: Brian, welcome to The Research Files. Now, this paper is a part of a wider research project, so why did you choose to investigate this topic and what do you hope eventuates from it?

Brian Lewthwaite: The study was motivated by developments that were occurring within the Australian context. There’s huge attention to the idea of effective teaching, quality teaching, and from my research background and my knowledge of what’s occurring in places like New Zealand and Canada (where I am now), I just believe that there was real need for us to qualify what we mean by ‘effective teaching’ by drawing from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice. But, the concern that has been voiced, in places like New Zealand, is that when we talk about quality teaching, it's likely that this needs to be grounded in more of a sociocultural imperative. So we need to realise that some of those contextual features are really important. So, the study really sought to augment the work that had already been [completed] in the area of effective teaching to give more of a sociocultural awareness of influences on student learning.

DR: The research involved interviewing teachers, students and parents about
quality teacher practice. Who was exactly involved in this phase of the research?

BL: So, the research is aligned with what we call a four-phase study, and in the four phases, the first phase is a qualitative phase, where we’re just listening to parents and students and teachers about what effective teaching is. I think, really strong questions that precipitated huge response, at times interviews that were potentially two to three hours long.

But, questions that were often posed to parents were ‘what is it that you, as a parent, would like teachers to know that you believe might influence your child in their learning?’ And then the question that was asked to students, probably the one that brought the most fruitful responses was a question like ‘next year, you’re going to be moving in to Grade 9, and what is it that you would like your teacher to know that can assist you in your learning?’ And then the question to teachers was along the same lines, so we were looking for a confirmability. So, from these three different points of view. But the teacher comment was ‘having worked in this community and worked with Indigenous students over the time that you’ve been here (and in some cases, that might have been multiple years) what have you come to realise is important in influencing you and your teaching, and if you were going to say anything to a new teacher about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students what is it that you would like them to hear?’

So, those three kinds of questions really opened the door of conversations. Some were brief, but some were very, very elaborate, and I think the longest comments primarily came from parents, who had a lot to say.

DR: Other than the answers that you’ve just mentioned there, were there any other main results from the comments of these interviews that you did that really jumped out at you from the three groups of people?

BL: I think the first thing to draw attention to is the lack of awareness that teachers had of the significance of history upon Indigenous students’ success in schools. I think this is really, really important. A lot of the interviews were done in rural Queensland in Catholic education schools, where the majority of the teachers have not been in service that long – many of them are new graduates who are in rural communities – I would think that probably the median experience age/years of service for teachers might have been around four years.

If we think of teacher education right now in all universities, in all colleges of education, teacher candidates will be exposed to things of importance to do with Indigenous students and their learning and I think the colonised history of Australia
and experiences that parents generationally would have had … graduate teachers would be well exposed to that. But what was quite clear in the interviews was not [having] a critical awareness of how that history really impacts on classrooms and their interactions with students today. I think the word I would use to describe it was there’s a very tenuous relationship between parents and their children and teachers, as represented by schools. So, the history of schooling continues to play out in the interactions that parents have with their children in going to school every day.

I think there were lots of comments that related to parents’ inability to change the system, or to change things on behalf of the student. So, they sought for things to work better for their children, but they didn’t necessary feel that they had the agency to bring about change on behalf of … So, I think a really important message was that many parents believe that they were at the mercy of the system, they were at the mercy of teachers and, although they were expressing a confidence of teachers to work on behalf of their children, they felt quite powerless to be able to do that.

The other dimension was the clearness and the clarity and the conciseness of what students said about what effective teaching was. If you look at what we call low-inference behaviours, very clear actions that are expressed by students that impact on their learning. In other words, when you take all these qualitative comments, they pretty quickly begin to give you an indication of what an effective teaching profile might be, and so when we’re working with teachers it gives very pragmatic, tangible, immediate actions that teachers can put in place, based upon what students are saying. The profile that’s developed from it becomes very much low-inference behaviours that teachers can immediately look at and evaluate themselves.

Overall, it was the attention to history from parents, and then also the specific insights that students had about what teachers could do. And in contrast to that, teachers tended to not be aware, critically, of the importance of that history on their interactions with students and didn’t seem to have the repertoire of teaching behaviours that they could enact that would meet their students’ needs. They had general ideas of what they could do, but not to the specific degree that students were communicating.

**DR:** If I could just bring you to the Venn-diagram that’s present in the [report published](http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3511&context=ajte), I found it quite interesting, the overlap between the quality teaching practices as reported by parents, students and teachers. What’s in common with all three of those groups is code switching and affective relationships. Would you be able to expand more on that?
BL: Teachers who were seeing themselves as effective, were very aware that at the core of effective teaching practice was placing emphasis on developing positive relationships that demonstrated their beliefs in students. It was not uncommon for students and parents to recognise what might be teachers’ ambivalence or teachers’ lack of concern. Knowing, through the physical actions of teachers, that teachers’ cared, but the demonstration of care came through very tangible means. That came from spending time with students, most importantly, in conversation that related to their learning. So, when students knew, and teachers knew, that a teacher was focused on their learning that became the cornerstone of an effective relationship. I think caring is demonstrated through such actions as having high expectations, spending time with the student and not ignoring them, encouraging them, showing attention to maybe things like a poor quality of work, or being late, or missing school.

For me, as an international researcher, I had never heard of the area of code switching. In the area of educational sociology, we talk about the importance of certain students having capital. They have capital to be able to negotiate the school system. But it was really fascinating to hear from – especially from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents – that they were teaching their kids how to navigate schooling; that there are social protocols that are necessary within schooling, or you’re not going to be successful, or you’re going to get to be in trouble. You’ve got to put up your hand, you can’t just get out of your seat and walk away. Often a lot of the things that cause students to get into trouble are really just codes of conduct that students might do at home, but they can’t do it at school. It was funny, because you actually had parents that talked about that when their children put on that school uniform on a Monday morning, they knew that they were going into school and that they had to behave in a particular way, they had to speak in a different way. Teachers also were aware that students were trying to navigate that space.

**DR: Finally then, what are the next steps of this research?**

BL: So, you’ll find that with that research there’s actually been several other publications which relate to phase two and phase three, and then finally to phase four. The qualitative research allowed us to develop what was called an effective teaching profile. So the effective teaching profile contains, I think something like 50 teacher behaviours that are categorised, that fall into around seven or eight categories. Then, from that statistical analysis, we were able to build an instrument, statistically, that will actually measure a teacher’s cultural competence in terms of effective teaching.

So, on the website [pedagogyofdifference.com](http://pedagogyofdifference.com)
what teachers can do is they can go to the website and they can answer questions that then gives them a profile. And then based on that profile, what they can do is they can make adjustments to their teaching and then determine what the consequence of that adjustment is on their students and their performance.

Ultimately, it comes back to the question, and the question was: What is it that teachers need to be doing that can cause their practice to be more effective, but especially with attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, at least for the communities that are represented in the study. There’s been a huge number of publications in Australia on effective teaching; what can teachers do for Indigenous students, but this issue is, it’s never been from a quantitative perspective. I think this is what the international literature is seeking, is just a more specific understanding of what teachers can do to bring about that same result.

**DR: Thank you for joining us on this episode of The Research Files Brian.**

**BL: It’s been a pleasure.**

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**References**


Think about your own experience. If you were talking to a new teacher about working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, what is it that you would like them to hear?

This study suggests focusing on learning is the cornerstone of an effective relationship. As an educator, what strategies do you use to build strong and effective relationships with students? What about parents, carers and
community elders?