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Doing and undoing reparative educational futures for First Nations teachers in Australia

Gail Mitchell[a], Peta Salter [b] and Carly Steele [c]

[a]Department of Education, Far North Queensland Region, Queensland, Australia; [b]College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University, Townsville City, Australia; [c]School of Education, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of teachers and stakeholders involved with an Australian First Nations initial teacher education pathway with a long history of working to secure a reparative educational future. Using the lens of Decolonising Race Theory (DRT), we critically analyse interview data to identify ongoing tensions between DRT tenets of the logic of elimination and reparative activism and explain how these forces work to simultaneously create and undo reparative futures of education. Whilst not diminishing the gains that have been made through reparative activism over time, we argue that a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ongoing interactions between settler-colonialism and reparative activism is required, with attention to the everyday, implicit, and explicit experiences of First Nations peoples to ensure much more than a restorative gloss to the future of Australian education.

Introduction

Internationally, the call for more First Nations[1] teachers in classrooms for the benefit of First Nations students is unwavering in response to widespread settler colonialism. This call is based on premises that First Nations teachers are more likely to have specific cultural knowledge, understand their students' struggles in balancing colonialism and racism, and can contribute to improved student engagement, outcomes, and an overall 'sense of comfort' when in leadership and mentoring roles (Landertinger, Tessaro, and Restoule 2021). Furthermore, these teachers contribute to reconciliation efforts and are 'better able to counteract and expand beyond Eurocentric curriculum and teaching models' (Tessaro, Landertinger, and Restoule 2021, 614) such as complex understandings of community (Salter, Mitchell and Steele, 2025; Watson 2009) crucial to negotiating white-centric curriculum. This acknowledges that while experiences of settler-colonialism are uniquely contextual, phenomena such as racial capitalism (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2022) are shared.

These teachers and their work, however, are often constructed as racialised teacher subjects (Hall 2018; Hogarth 2019; Marom 2019) within settler-colonial contexts, in which 'teachers "become" who they are by taking up the subject positions made available to them' (Santoro 2015, 861) within a range of discourses. Celebrated symbolically, but without structural change, these teachers are received with conditional hospitality (Ahmed 2012) that they reciprocate by integrating into the status quo facilitated by policy that constructs place and perpetuates racist legacies (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016) within a historical context of displacement. Internationally, critical scholars examining the rise of the 'achievement gap' in educational policy and analysing the phenomena of 'gap talk' cite improvements that give the impression of progress and dwindling inequities (Gillborn et al. 2017). 'gap talk' is a dominant phenomenon in Australia. For example, the Closing the Gap initiative sought to address inequity for 17 target areas including education, only to consolidate current inequitable models of education (Rudolph 2016). The Australian national curriculum includes a seemingly progressive cross-curriculum priority 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures' intended for embedding across key learning areas, though critique observes that it reinforces racialised assumptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student underachievement (Maxwell, Lowe, and Salter 2018). This priority is rationalised by 'distinct needs' bound to the achievement gap yet silent in its settler-orientated assumption that curriculum is culture and race neutral. The subjective effect of such positioning has wideranging implications for teachers left to implement curriculum.

Indeed, there is a history of 'progressive' moves positioned as departures from previous policies, mobilising dichotomous historical logic to acknowledge the past as a place of injustice, and 'the present as a different time, a new time, a better time' (Rudolph 2016, 440). The necessary revolution for transformation and reform, however, continues to seek substantive traction (Hogarth 2018). Rudolph (2016) argues that the Closing the Gap policy, tied to the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, is another example of a discursive shift; 'at once seeing and dismissing the past . . . [as] an expedient political act' within the 'policy dilemma' of stagnant progress, and with a 'misrepresentation of structural and embedded inequalities' (p. 441). Furthermore, in settler-devised policy 'community' is often simplified to reference local place or abstracted in ambiguous references to 'cultural relationships'. The latter abstractly reflects difficulties of accommodating concepts of Aboriginality in non-Indigenous frameworks (Watson 2009) and fails to utilise Indigenous definitions of community (Shay and Lampert 2022). First Nations students attempt to achieve success within, and despite, such positioning. There is a 'conceptual, ideological, and practical distance' (Shay et al. 2025, 344) between ideas of Indigenous education and educational excellence in Australian mainstream discourses.

In Australia, various initiatives have sought to redress educational injustices of settler-colonialism. The most significant was the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) in 2011, supported by an eight-million-dollar federal government investment. Recently, the appeal for more First Nations teachers was reimagined in a call to co-design actions to attract and retain more First Nations teachers (Department of Education 2022), supported by a two-point-four-million-dollar investment in the 2024–2025 federal budget to develop and implement a First Nations Teacher Strategy. The latter has been introduced as a form of 'repair' as part of the response to the

Quality Initial Teacher Education (QITE) Review initiated in 2021. The *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education* (Paul et al. 2021), which followed the review, included recommendations to target and attract Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples to teaching. This was formalised in the ensuing *Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel* (Scott et al. 2023) which stated that there is a 'need to increase the number of people starting and finishing ITE [Initial Teacher Education], including those currently under-represented, such as First Nations people' (p. 22) and linking this to performance indicators for ITE and funding (see p. 44).

This unfolding policy moment promises the new but unmistakably necessitates critical and cautious optimism. Many have come and gone in Australia, and the ITE pathway under study here is believed to be one of the longest continuous programs. While there are many achievements through these programs to celebrate, questions linger regarding their reparative aims and seemingly elusive transformation of education for First Nations peoples, as ideally, we would like to not *need* these programs. This paper explores the undeniable past-present-future relationship with colonial histories, present educational wrongs, and future possibilities such programs have. Firstly, the conceptual framework for this work is established, using Decolonial Race Theory (DRT), while also noting the utility of racial capitalism in exploring past-present settler-colonial contexts, and reparative redress for identifying future possibilities. Then, data from the case is analysed using two DRT tenets: reparative activism and the logic of elimination. Finally, we discuss the structural challenges highlighted by this analysis and the nuances required for future possibilities of reparative activism beyond settler-colonialism restorative gloss.

Decolonising Race Theory and reparative futures

Moodie's (2017) Decolonising Race Theory (DRT) is a conceptual framework offering seven tenets that seek to advance the critique of race and deficit previously established in legal scholarship and known as Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT exposes racialised problem constructions and silenced relationships of racial inequity. It has been extended to education systems to explain racialised inequality in access and outcomes (see the work of Ladson-Billings, etc.). Internationally, critical scholars have investigated the discursive positioning of 'achievement gaps' in educational policy to suggest increasing improvements and decreasing inequities (Gillborn et al. 2017). In the United Kingdom, Gillborn (2008) observed the 'achievement gap' displaying characteristics of 'locked-in inequity' based on Daria Roithmayr's theory of self-perpetuating and locked in market monopolies. As Emirbayer and Desmond (2012) note, 'Racial principles . . . impose themselves as part of the very order of things because they are deeply inscribed in the objective structures of racial domination' (p. 579), visible often in Whiteness or 'mainstream' as the standard against which all other categories are compared. This order of things also inhibits critique where reflexivity is 'conflated . . . with self-effacing, self-disclosure' which 'often serves more to establish [the] legitimacy' (p. 581) of this order.

CRT has been taken up by Indigenous scholars such as Brayboy (2005, 2023) and Moodie (2017) who argue that its focus on *race* rather than *place* (Moodie 2017, 33) does not fully account for First Nations peoples' sovereign status. Brayboy's (2023) TribalCrit seeks to extend the 'Black-White' binary (p. 233) and assumptions racism is endemic to society, emphasising that colonisation is also endemic, with a focus on 'inconsistencies in

the structural systems and institutions of education' (p. 241). Moodie's (2017) seven tenets of DRT, encompassing the Logic of elimination, Indigeneity, Sovereignty and Indigenous futurity, Cultural interface, Relationality and collectivism, Indigenous methodologies and Reparative activism, seek to 'propose an updated version' (p. 37) of the nine tenets of TribalCrit to theorise the positioning of Indigenous peoples, while distinguishing it in the Australian context and centring Indigenous sovereignty and land rights. 'Decolonisation' in DRT seeks to 'recognise(s) critique but then move(s) beyond' (p. 42) to centre 'the disruption of the knowledge-power dialectic which perpetuates deficit discourses' (p. 43). In this study, we focus on two DRT tenets to explore the 'doing' (reparative activism as a central aim of such ITE programs) and 'undoing' (the logic of elimination as a historically discrete characteristic of settler-colonialism domination) of reparative educational futures for First Nations peoples in Australia to explore the knowledge- power dialectic in past-present-future relationships.

Reparative activism examines the ways theory and practice are connected to work towards social change. Drawing on Brayboy's (2023) tenet of action or activism focussed on 'improving the life chances and situations of specific communities' (Brayboy 2023, 241), we explore how research participants have discursively positioned 'generative and reparative intent' (Moodie 2017, 42) within and of the ITE pathway, asking to what extent an obligation to work for social change informs their imagined future possibilities. With the aim of training First Nations teachers, who can, in turn, support First Nations students to navigate the complex demands of settler-colonial education systems, First Nations ITE pathways are representative of the reparative work needed to transform settler-colonial education systems leading to social change for First Nations peoples and communities. A lens of reparative activism seeks to understand how the pathway and experiences of those invested in it centre First Nations knowledges, while acknowledging the 'resistance, struggle and conflict' (Moodie 2017, 42) in the process of doing so.

The lens of *logic of elimination* examines the ways colonisation and white supremacy are endemic to the 'very order of things', and 'serves to describe the processes of erasure that colonial education systems have served' (Moodie 2017, 39). This draws on Brayboy's (2023) primary tenets that colonisation is endemic, and that policies directed at First Nations peoples are rooted in imperialism. In the US context, Brayboy (2023) notes that 'colonization has been so complete that even many American Indians fail to recognize that we are taking up colonialist ideas when we fail to express ourselves in ways that may challenge dominant society's ideas' (p. 235). The First Nations ITE pathway explored here sits within existing schooling structures with a history of 'assimilationist intent' through policies 'premised on the assumption of inferiority and damage' (Moodie 2017, 39). Therefore, it is, critical to examine the 'everyday' slippages into 'narratives of damage' (Moodie and Fricker 2023, 21) that act to legitimise, rather than disrupt racial order. While seeming progressive, the extent the positioning of First Nations peoples as sovereign peoples is undermined in discourses of and about First Nations ITE pathways, and how the past-present-future relationship inform structures within which they operate can delimit reparative aims of future possibilities.

Underpinning our choice of DRT is the acknowledgement that racial capitalism (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2022) is endemic to settler-colonial contexts, and education is a tool for enclosure and dispossession. As a fundamental act of colonial violence, enclosing is the process of extracting value from land and in doing so

dispossessing the people whose lifeworlds are connected to it. For the ITE pathway under examination, there are tensions between student support sites which are situated within government schools, where reparative spaces are enclosed within dispossessed sites. Subsequent divided labour hierarchies of worth are still experienced by those accessing these support sites, and those that have graduated through the program. This positioning of First Nations teachers as somehow inferior despite being equally qualified in Australia (Salter et al., 2025; Hall 2018; Hogarth 2019; Santoro 2015) is mirrored in other settler-colonial contexts such as Canada (Marom 2019; Oloo and Kiramba 2019). Smith's (2004) racial battle fatigue (see for example Bradbury, Tereshchenko, and Mills 2023; Pizarro and Kohli 2020 or Smith, Hung, and Franklin 2011) highlights how divisions of teaching are classed, racialised, and steeped in colonial relations.

Furthermore, education through extracting value creates material value, making and sustaining hierarchies of wealth. Notably, 'public systems of education are routinely defended for the value they bring to the nation state . . . and to individuals' (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2022, 434). What is considered more or less valuable, and by whom, simultaneously constitutes and maintains 'hierarchies of worth' (p. 434). For example, 'diversity' can be a valuable educational commodity, yet it is often valorised and celebrated in tokenistic and performative ways (Ahmed 2012) to not disturb ongoing practices of enclosure and dispossession, and racialised divisions of labour. 'Extractive intentions' are highlighted when teachers of colour are called upon to diversify curriculum by bringing 'authentic' and 'valid' credentials to the work as teachers who 'walk both worlds' (Salter et al., 2025). However, at the same time, 'educational credentials are one of the most important social and economic ascribers of worth that also, by implication, devalue[s] what is not included within the credential' (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2022, 436). Tensions exist when initiatives are held up as 'flagship' marketing material for diversity initiatives of colonial institutions, where 'such projects of devaluing human life through the performance of valorisation is a cruelty' (437). However, while this appears to be an untenable position within epistemic colonial violence, we aim to generate an 'education analysis that can engage reparations for, and the abolition of, systems of education that are premised on racialized enclosures/dispossession, divisions of labour and extractions of human value' (437).

Finally, Sriprakash's (2023) concept of repair and reparative redress is used to explore past-present-future relationships with colonial history that warrant decolonisation. UNESCO's (2021) *International Commission on the Futures of Education* recently declared: 'we need a new social contract for education that can repair injustices while transforming the future' (p. iiv). Drawing attention to the 'invocation of repair' (p. 782) and the 'political and conceptual affordances of reparative frameworks of justice in education' (p. 791) Sriprakash (2023) adopts 'temporal politics . . . that reparative frameworks recognise that until injustices are actively addressed, they can endure in social institutions – such as education – which also shape lives-to-come' (p. 783). ITE pathways can be catalysts for the reparative future of education, attending to co-constitutive material, epistemic, pedagogical, and relational repair. Responding to this requires the 'creation of educational relationships that are centred on processes of dialogue and exchange' focusing on 'epistemic and dialogic conditions of reparation – that is, its educational premise' (Sriprakash et al. 2020, 2). Following this provocation, DRT is

used to analytically explore how such pathways may inadvertently hold 'restorative gloss' (Sriprakash 2023, 786) and '"thin" policy responses that construct disadvantaged groups in deficit terms … leaving in place structural injustices of education that produce unequal opportunities, practices and outcomes' (p. 785).

Method

The benefits of ITE pathways for First Nations teachers are being increasingly recognised (see Salter et al., 2025; Gower, Bogachenko, and Oliver 2022; Steele, Gower, and Bogachenko 2024), yet, there is a tendency toward adopting 'what works' paradigms to advocate for programs and establish their value. Whilst such research is very much needed to improve current practices and provisions, it also necessitates exploration of how First Nations teachers who have graduated from ITE pathways are discursively constructed within settler-colonial educational systems. This reflects the fact that no matter how well-designed and executed a First Nations ITE pathway is, it still operates within a broader sociological context – and that context in relation to First Nations teachers' experiences needs to be better understood. Thus, this study is situated within a qualitative research paradigm designed to critically respond to the following research question:

> How do *reparative activism* and *the logic of elimination* uncover the past-present-future relationship with colonial histories, present educational wrongs, and future possibilities in the discourse of First Nations teachers and other educational stakeholders engaged with a First Nations ITE pathway?

Researcher positionality

In centring Indigenous knowledges, it is important that our individual positions and social locations to the order of things are described. We are 'interested authors' (Moodie and Fricker 2023, 15) in that we are deeply 'in relation' (p. 28) with ITE pathways for First Nations peoples that seek repair and reparative redress. Author 1 is a First Nations Gudjal woman and has been the manager for the ITE pathway at the state department of education, overseeing the operational partnership between the department, and its partner educational institutions for over 20 years. Author 2 is a non-Indigenous woman who has spent over six years working as the coordinator of the pathway under study at the tertiary education partner institution. Her research takes critical approaches to the development and enactment of education policy and pre-service teachers' efficacy and understandings of the contexts and communities in which they teach. Author 3 is a non-Indigenous woman who is an applied linguist and academic in the field of teacher education having worked in two First Nations ITE pathways at different institutions. She has been actively engaged in First Nations educational contexts for the last 15 years as a teacher and a researcher.

Research context

Data are drawn from a case study documenting the impact of First Nations teachers who graduated from a First Nations ITE pathway. This pathway is supported by a partnership between the relevant state government department of education, a vocational education and training (VET) provider, and a university. Students can enter this pathway in high school via study with the VET provider and move incrementally through qualifications to articulate into an ITE degree. All qualifications can be studied externally, with high levels of support at designated study centres, situated in government schools spread throughout the state.

The boundaries of this case (Yin 2018) were set by a state government defined region, which included the largest proportion of First Nations students in any region of the state and encompassed 13 of the 22 schools located in identified First Nations communities across the state. The case itself explores the intricate, 'situated . . . relationships' (Stake 2005, 142) of teacher graduates in the two schools in this region that host study centres. One of which is in an identified First Nations community and a former mission.[2] The two schools in this case span the traditional countries of at least three First Nations groups.

Data collection and analysis

The case provides insight into the phenomenon through narrative interviews with multiple participants across two groups (Table 1). The teachers had been teaching for over 10 years. The stakeholders included school principals and mentors, both experienced teachers, who work at the school sites to support students enrolled in the First Nations ITE pathway.

The research team was co-led by Author 1 and Author 2. A research assistant recruited the project participants via email distributed to all pathway alumni and principals and mentors at each school and conducted interviews to avoid any possible coercion from the research project team who would likely have pre-existing relationships with potential participants. Interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams using the question: What impact have the First Nations teachers who have graduated from the pathway had on their students and in their school communities? The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. A conversational approach was adopted in line with narrative interview structure and yarning methodologies (Barlo et al. 2021; Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010; Geia, Hayes, and Usher 2013; Shay 2021; Walker et al. 2014).

This study uses two tenets of DRT as an analytic lens for examining interview data; *reparative activism* and *the logic of elimination*, supported by a coding framework adapted from Moodie and Fricker (2023) that details expanded primary node keywords

Table 1. Interview participants.

School	First Nations teacher graduates of the ITE pathway (n = 3)	Partnership stakeholders (n = 4)
1	Teacher 1	Principal 1
	Teacher 2	Mentor 1
2 (First Nations community)	Teacher 3	Principal 2
		Mentor 2

and descriptions to support analysis. Using iterative reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021) transcripts were read by all authors first for familiarisation, then a second time to test applicability of the coding framework by identifying and reaching consensus on interview extracts that aligned with primary node keywords and descriptions, and a third time to coalesce primary node examples into secondary nodes that then used generated themes through attention to narrative detail. By way of illustration, examples of the primary node of elimination, defined by Moodie and Fricker (2023) as 'settler colonial processes of erasure' (p. 24), were coalesced into the secondary code of racism (Moodie and Fricker 2023). In data, there was a distinct theme of 'legitimacy' linked to experiences of racism.

Ethics

Following this model, data were collected in 2022. Ethics approval (H8259) to conduct the research was attained from the university, with additional approval granted by the Department of Education, as well as individual consent to participate. Additionally, the research followed the four principles for conducting research in First Nations contexts set out in the Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (AIATSIS 2020), namely: Indigenous self-determination; Indigenous leadership; Impact and value; Sustainability and accountability.

Analysis

Facilitated by tenets reparative activism and the logic of elimination, our critical analysis first presents the First Nations ITE pathway (hereinafter referred to as 'the pathway') as an example of reparative activism that views the First Nations teachers as activists in their local contexts. This aspect dominated the data collected, largely due to nature of the interview question that asked specifically about the impact of the program. After a summary of the three main actions identified within this tenet, noting this first tenet is already well-described in the literature we focus on the lesser described tenet – how the logic of elimination is evident in the experiences of the teachers who have graduated from the pathway and in the everyday discourses of those teachers, and other educational stakeholders.

A reparative pathway

In this section we explore how teachers, mentors and principals position the pathway as reparative action that has potential to secure Indigenous educational futures not only for First Nations teachers who have graduated from this pathway, but also for students they teach and their schooling communities. Commonly cited reparative actions associated with the pathway included the impetus for social change through education, and the value education holds in terms of building community connections and including Indigenous knowledges in education.

Obligation to work for social change

Both mentors highlighted the role that the teachers played in the school and broader community as activists, advocates and as being aspirational for students and community members. Mentor 2 observed that the teachers have been advocates within a colonial education system where community '*know that their mob will speak up*' and have helped to make the pathway into teaching careers clear and visible to others where they have '*absolutely driven the way in which we look at teaching at [community]*'. When discussing the pathway as reparative, Mentor 2 noted the benefits from study extended to '*better paying jobs ... with a bit more status*' even if students did not go on to graduate. Principal 1 also noted '*economically. Being a [pathway] graduate was actually beneficial*'.

Teacher 1, as a leader in their school community, described their agency to make change and work toward securing reparative educational futures for Indigenous peoples. Teacher 1 highlighted the future-looking nature of their work, such as introducing the Indigenous leaders of the future program, to '*get the kids involved ... teach them about our way of identity and culture ... I hope that it helps them have a sense of identity and acknowledgement that there is someone in the education sector that understands and wants our history ... the true history*'. Taking an aspirational stance, Teacher 1 spoke of their ability to build relationships and have '*that connection, building that bridge between community and school*'. Active language employed by Teacher 1 was noted throughout with verbs like '*build*', '*create*', '*introduce*' '*run and coordinate*' indicating a sense of agency.

Teacher 2 highlighted how as Indigenous role models, they connected with students through shared language and cultural backgrounds. For example:

> unless [students] have heard me speak either Creole or some form of language ... they previously [used] at home, and they see that ... connectedness then and being able to open themselves up and allow you to be able to, I suppose become a part of their circle

However, this connection through language and cultural background was contrasted with disconnection with education. For example, Teacher 2 evoked cycles of disadvantage: '*the truth of the matter is that it is only those families who envisaged the value of education can fully appreciate the importance and opportunities that can be given thus breaking the cycle to develop change*'. Thus, the sense of elimination was potentially stronger than acts of reparative activism. Teacher 3 highlighted the importance of Indigenous peoples to education and the knowledges that they bring when '*the best part about me working in my own community is that I know the community I know the people here*' and could share with non-Indigenous teachers using local knowledge and language to create curriculum resources. Related to this, they discussed leadership opportunities within schools.

Mentor 1 describes the teachers as playing a role in ensuring a '*very culture-centred school*' and stated that they were aspirational for students. The value of the pathway was also derived from the expertise of the teachers. Principal 1 highlighted the '*really powerful and really valuable*' impact of the teachers in the school and described them as being '*instrumental in terms of leading cultural capability*', '*a real advocate for ESL [English as*

a Second Language] or EALD [English as an Additional Language or Dialect] students and you know really promoting their needs' and doing a lot of work '*around the visioning for the school*'. Principal 2 highlighted the value of teachers' local knowledge for embedding Indigenous knowledges in curriculum,

> [They were] able to contribute from both angles if I if I guess that's the right way to say it. Whereas you know we could provide guidance and criteria from a department education curriculum viewpoint, local staff can from a cultural and local perspective, but the [pathway] graduates have both.

As the respective leaders of their schools, both principals talked of an obligation to work for social change, giving high praise to graduates of the pathway and valuing knowledges they bring to their schools. The pathway was presented as an important initiative, and the principals appeared to have a shared positioning in their commitment to the social change the pathway promotes. Principal 1 described themself as '*a big advocate for the [pathway] program*' and Principal 2 stated their personal goals of reparative activism so that '*when I retire, that we have a local person can take over as principal*' noting that the pathway was '*a critical way of achieving*' this capacity building. Principal 1 also noted the pathway was a significant investment in the community increasing levels of employment and ensuring that the kindy could be staffed. Therefore, promoting sustainable Indigenous futures.

All participants shared a commitment to social change. For some, like Teacher 1, this included truth telling and aspiration building, and for others such as principals, this included sustainable change and leadership opportunities. Common across all participants was the importance of community building and advocacy for Indigenous knowledges in imagining this future.

The logic of elimination

Our analysis showed the logic of elimination was fuelled by complex notions of perceived 'legitimacy' that we believe are intricately connected to the stigmatisation of, and unfounded beliefs about, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian society. This played out in data through perceptions about the legitimacy of:

- First Nations peoples as a teacher and/or leader,
- First Nations ITE pathway, and
- First Nations knowledges in practices, policies, and systems.

The 'legitimacy' of First Nations peoples as teachers and/or leaders

In both explicit and implicit ways, the legitimacy of First Nations peoples as teachers and/or leaders was questioned, resonating with previously documented phenomena in Australia regarding the marginalisation of First Nations teachers (see Hall 2018; Hogarth 2019). Teacher 3 described a prevailing perception that First Nations teachers were simply 'not as good' as non-Indigenous teachers, and had to 'prove' themselves to convince non-Indigenous peoples otherwise:

> I think it's really important because I think, a lot of people think that maybe if you're Indigenous that your ability to teach is not as good as a non-Indigenous person but I think having teachers come and go, I think people can see that, you know, we really are on the same par as everybody else and it doesn't matter what background you are as long as you're willing to put in the work and the effort, and that you know, you're looking out for the best interests of the children. (Teacher 3, interview)

Relatedly, Principal 2 uses the term, 'legitimate leaders' evoking the notion that sometimes First Nations people are in leadership positions as a tokenistic gesture, not as a legitimate choice:

> My ultimate goal would be that when I retire, we have a local person take over as principal that would be my ultimate goal, and that we have them through all of our leadership team at the moment, my leadership team of 10 has two local people on, which I'm really pleased about, and they're legitimate, you know, middle leaders. But there are more people who have capacity and that's my goal is to develop them, and you know, see where we can go so, and I see [pathway] as a critical way of achieving that. (Principal 2, interview)

As previously noted, often deficit terminology such as 'legitimate leaders' is used simultaneously with, or alongside speech proclaiming goals for reparative activism. In this case, the reparative goal or desired future is one of Indigenous educational leadership, a worthy aspiration. Yet it is imbued with complex notions of 'legitimacy'. What makes a First Nations leader 'legitimate', who decides this, and at what 'cost'? As Ahmed (2012) notes, when such positions are 'taken up as signs' of reparation, 'we [people of colour] are in trouble' (p. 43). Once celebrated as symbols of overcoming institutional whiteness, subsequently drawing attention to tokensim becomes difficult, and can be read as a 'sign of "ingratitude"' (Ahmed 2012, 43) for conditional hospitality.

Throughout the interviews reparative activism was juxtaposed with narratives of Indigenous inability and perceived legitimacy. For example, a teacher was noted as being '*really valuable*' – but for the principal, this value, in part, seemed derived from the context: '*it's really valuable having somebody, a local person with that level of input in their decisions or in the schools is really powerful and really valuable, particularly in an Aboriginal community where there's a lot of complexity, a lot of dysfunction*' (Principal 1). This potentially diminishes the value attributed here, questioning if they are inherently valuable, or *relatively* valuable in a context of dysfunction, or 'damage' (Moodie and Fricker 2023). This messaging reminds us of the commonly heard phrases that generally follow the lines of 'but you are one of the 'good ones' because you have been able to 'rise above the dysfunction'.

Such perspectives are not only held by non-Indigenous peoples and can also be seen in dominant narratives about having the 'right work ethic' or 'valuing education'. Potentially tied to broader Australian nationalist discourses of a 'fair go' for all, such populist phrases act to downplay, diminish, or render invisible the complex ways that race, place, power, and privilege interact to produce uneven outcomes – or for First Nations peoples, act to erase their sovereign status (i.e. logic of elimination). For example, Teacher 2 describes the community as being 'you know . . . it was somewhat dysfunctional' and:

> Generally, those students will often see education as being too difficult, or not important. And the truth of the matter is that it is only those families who envisaged the value of education can fully appreciate the importance and opportunities that can be given thus breaking the cycle to develop change in their future. (Teacher 2, interview)

As Brayboy (2023) notes, the 'debilitating influences' of endemic racism can be seen where First Nations peoples take up colonialist ideas and 'fail to express ourselves in ways that may challenge dominant society's ideas about who and what we are supposed to be' (p. 235). Teacher 2 continues, lamenting the current state of education and the 'lack of value' children, youth, and families ascribe to it, drawing contrasts between the present and past mission days. In line with Brayboy (2023), it is not uncommon in such conversations to hear praise given for mission days for the quality of education provided and the work ethic instilled.

> My auntie I suppose was a huge influence in the fact that when she was on living in missionary days that she was able to embrace, education, and fulfill her role within the health department. And, you know, which was very successful. She was able to travel the world and work with people in general, from different countries in different backgrounds, which provided her with a wealth of knowledge. Yes, I then saw the importance of it. Because, reflecting back on that her two brothers … There was a significant difference I suppose in the work. Not so much that work ethic, but the type of work here being a health worker and two younger brothers being Stockman. Yep. (Teacher 2, interview)

These seemingly innocuous comments, when repeated over time by many, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, create a narrative about education that communicates a clear and singular view about what the 'problem' is, and what is needed in Indigenous education to 'fix it'. Yet, as widely argued in the literature (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2016; Harvey and Russell-Mundine 2018; Hogarth 2018; Shay et al. 2025), simplistic problem-solution paradigms are not only unhelpful but act to consolidate the marginalisation of First Nations peoples through rendering invisible complex realities of the situation. They represent the logic of elimination at work.

The 'legitimacy' of the pathway

It is not only the legitimacy of First Nations peoples that is called into question, but the pathway as well, with the two being intricately connected. There seems to be a dominant perspective that the pathway is not 'real' teacher education and consequently, the First Nations teachers who graduate from this program are '*frowned upon*' and not '*taken seriously and respected*' (Teacher 1). This resonates with covert racism documented in other settler-colonial contexts such as Canada, where similar programs are devalued as less professional (Marom 2019). Reflecting a 'stigma of incompetence' (Niemann 2012, 338) it is assumed that participants are selected solely because of their First Nations identity, disregarding their capability and qualifications. Relatedly, because First Nations teachers are not viewed as 'legitimate' leaders or teachers of equal standing, as described above, their pathway is therefore perceived as not being of the same standard. The outcome from this, is the stigmatisation of the pathway; a point made by Teacher 1 who has '*heard some really nasty things that people have said about [pathway] students*'.

Teacher 1 described the need for '*a bit more education around the fact that [pathway] is an opportunity for people to look to learn and teach in their community*'. In doing so,

they identified the reparative approach that underlies the program. This, like many of the statements about the reparative goals of the program, is followed by a '*but . . .* ' and Teacher 1 turned to justifying the pathway, explaining that it is no different to other university programs; '*their access to education through [x] university is no different to any other student . . . apart from the fact that we have [mentors] that may help assist*'. It seems that this very fact – that there are mentors to assist, an important act of reparative activism to ensure reparative futures, also acts to 'undo' their achievement. Teacher 1 went on to justify that the pathway was not so different to modes of online learning that are very common now, '*you're learning externally, which thousands of students do now*'. Teacher 1's tone then shifted, as did their language toward more direct speech. No longer couching their words with justifications, they draw on their own direct experiences of racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004):

> That's right. Now we need to, I think we need to be really clear on this, so that when teachers that are coming out of [pathway] and not frowned upon and that they are taken seriously and respected.
>
> And yes, I think that's a big thing because it's been, I think it's travelling through the grapevine that some people as the negativity around the [pathway], and people don't see the true value of it . . . So I think we need to also change that mindset of people that people have, I don't know, I've heard some really nasty things that people have said about [pathway] students.
>
> And I said, you do realize I'm a [pathway] student.
>
> And they're like, Oh.
>
> We need to be thinking about what to say about other people. (Teacher 1, interview)

Whilst Teacher 1 was the only participant who directly voiced the stigmatisation of the pathway and how it is not viewed as 'legitimate' education, it can be seen in the subtle choices of phrasing and self-corrections in the speech of Mentor 2. They initially named the pathway by the acronym it is widely known as, but then clarifies that the First Nations teachers are not graduates of a pathway but rather from a university:

> in [community] the [pathway] brand, we have no problem with it because everyone knows what it is. Even people who aren't involved in education because over the years over the 30 plus years, we've had many [pathway] or [university name] graduates through the [pathway] mode of delivery. (Mentor 2, interview)

Later, it appeared that Mentor 2 was being intentionally careful with their choice of language to signal they are graduates of a university and not a pathway to counter the well-known and prevailing stigmatisation of the program:

> So [graduate's] impact . . . to be able to drive programs and things like that. So that's been enormous so having [graduate]. Graduate through [university name] with a qualification. (Mentor 2, interview)

The 'legitimacy' of First Nations knowledges

All stakeholders – the teachers, mentors, and principals – pointed to the value of the cultural knowledge that the teachers held. Representing a form of reparative activism, it is

an important act of recognition not only for the teachers individually but of First Nations knowledges collectively. However, at the same time, the legitimacy of First Nations knowledges was being questioned through various mechanisms, as described in this section.

Teacher 1, who previously described their leadership and sense of agency, also described how this was constrained by settler-colonial expectations of what First Nations knowledges are – and how they should be taught in the classroom. Acts of reparative activism were directly contrasted with settler-colonial processes of erasure in their teaching of First Nations histories and cultures.

Towards the end of the interview, Teacher 1 discloses that they chose to establish and teach 'Indigenous studies' in their school. The reparative goal was to '*teach [students] about our history*' and '*teach [students] about our way of identity and culture*' that they state '*is not part of the curriculum*' – an official act of elimination. Because of this, Teacher 1 '*had to do my own research*' which although demonstrating agency and leadership in the area was undertaken with '*no support*' making it a time-consuming task and a responsibility borne only to Teacher 1 as a consequence of their indigeneity. This pattern of activism marred by elimination continues in the examples Teacher 1 presents:

> I hope that it helps [students] have a sense of identity and acknowledgement [reparative activism] that there is someone in the education sector that understands and wants our history [logic of elimination]

> 'The true history to be taught the way it should be taught [reparative activism]. And without fear of that knowledge being shared'. [logic of elimination]

> 'I got some positive feedback, a lot of, a lot of staff thanked me [reparative activism] I also got some constructive feedback'. [logic of elimination]

The 'constructive' feedback Teacher 1 referred to is not, in fact, constructive and instead acts to delegitimise First Nations knowledges, playing into notions of it not being 'real' knowledge – and certainly not equal to other (Western) subject areas. Aligned with the belief that Indigenous studies should be a subject that is easy to pass, Teacher 1 '*was marking too hard*'. They were told the subject was 'too theoretical', '[it's a] *specialist class and we can't . . . it's you know, it's more practical . . . than theoretical*'. Teacher 1 had intentionally '*incorporated theoretical studies*' which did not fit with the broader expectations that the subject would be practical – and easy for students to pass. Reluctantly, Teacher 1 revealed the lack of institutional support: '*It kind of felt like it was a subject that was, by a head of curriculum . . . I don't want to say, I felt like it was being brushed off*'. This aligned with a series of primary analytic nodes, for example, White supremacy, deficit, narratives of Indigenous inability, and concurs with Smith's (2021) formative reminder of colonial structures, their mechanisms to centre the legitimacy of Western knowledge, and self-appointed arbitration of 'what counts'. Discounting theoretical or intellectually challenging work here does not acknowledge the intellectual work Teacher 1 and students are already doing at the cultural interface to navigate two lifeworlds or acknowledge the complexity and interrelationships of Indigenous ways of knowing. It also points to the importance of knowledges that sit outside of colonial reference to reparative remembering, where a tendency to dismiss those that are not considered 'proper subjects

of study ... reflect[s] the continued influence of narrow epistemological categories' (Sriprakash et al. 2020, 6).

The conversation turns to a broader reflection on how First Nations knowledges are delegitimised by Western colonial educational institutions with Teacher 1 stating:

> And I have this sense that this is the tendency with anything to do with Indigenous perspectives even today ... And I feel very passionate as a [graduate through the pathway] ... it's pretty important that we, you know, do things the right ways, not a tick and flick system. (Teacher 1, interview)

Teacher 1 concluded with a sense of despair and disempowerment, '*we want our students to all be successful. There is only so much that we can do inside the school*'.

Similarly, throughout the interviews formal Western qualifications appear to be equated with ultimate 'legitimacy' and 'value'. According to Mentor 2 federally mandated mechanisms such as the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE)[3] acted to reinforce Western knowledge and monolingual standard English language skills as the legitimate and desired/required sets of knowledges and skills for education. From this perspective, LANTITE is designed to 'safeguard' education by enforcing or protecting particular 'standards', that is, White standards. Mentor 2 described LANTITE as '*a real blocker*' and '*an impediment*' to more teachers graduating from the pathway. When prompted by the interviewer to explain more about the barriers to degree completion, Mentor 2 simply states, '*language*' before going on to explain how this impacts almost every aspect of the degree from assessment to LANTITE:

> They're all [First Nations language] speakers and they can sustain standard Australian English within certain settings, conversationally and within certain styles of writing. You know, lengthy academic purposes, that's real, it's not the knowledge, it's the language. Yeah, that's what I believe anyway. I mean, there's all other factors, of course.

Mentor 2's comments raise important questions about the fairness of university assessments and standardised assessments for First Nations students who speak languages other than standard Australian English. In the previous section about the reparative pathway, all stakeholders described the incredible value of First Nations teachers in terms of their cultural knowledge and language ability acting as a '*conduit*' (Principal 2) between community/culture and the school. Yet, this knowledge and language skills are not recognised in university-based assessments or standardised tests such as the LANTITE. Nor are First Nations knowledges and languages viewed as legitimate forms of knowledge – an act of elimination. Mentor 2 went on to describe the consequences for First Nations students who believe the reparative pathway will be enough to secure Indigenous educational futures:

> Yeah. And then people don't really. They think they're gonna get there and then they just don't get their dreams ... Then they got lots of debt. (Mentor 2, interview)

This reminds us of Reynolds' (in Ellinghaus 2003, 184) 'empty promise of assimilation', where First Nations peoples were sold the idea that through assimilation their lives would be materially improved. Not only did this not eventuate as a reality, it was never intended to (Wolfe 2006). In this case, the restorative gloss (Sriprakash 2023) of the reparative pathway is sold as a way forward for First Nations peoples, and students, to right the wrongs of the past and secure Indigenous educational futures, however, when this does

not materialise for those who do not possess the 'right' sets of knowledges and language (being Western knowledges and standard Australian English) they are left instead with '*a pile of debt*' (Mentor 2).

Discussion

The tenets reparative activism and the logic of elimination were seen in the experiences of teachers who graduated from the pathway and in the everyday discourses of those teachers, and other educational stakeholders. There is evident advocacy from all participants for the reparative intent of the pathway, specifically an obligation to work for social change in the future, and in the present such as the teachers who cite their actions to *build*, *create*, and *work in my own community* for change and how they are acknowledged by others as being *instrumental* and *advocates* of change. And, while the pathway is seeming progressive, the extent that First Nations peoples are positioned as sovereign peoples is undermined in deficit discourses of and about the pathway.

At this stage, the pathway does appear to inadvertently hold 'restorative gloss' of '"thin" policy responses' failing to completely deconstruct the deficit terms about disadvantaged groups (Sriprakash 2023, 786). This leaves unchallenged some 'structural injustices of education that produce unequal opportunities, practices and outcomes' (785). In particular, the explicit and implicit ways in which legitimacy of what is valuable and valued is questioned. A point of tension is the hierarchies of worth intimated in participant narratives, where the worth, or legitimacy of First Nations teacher leaders, the pathway and knowledges are devalued through slippages within reparative discourses. This illuminates tensions to reparative work situated within an education system that 'has built its house' (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2022, 437) on premises of institutional Whiteness that inform what is valorised because it does not overtly challenge the status quo. There are potentially extractive intentions in conditional hospitality (Ahmed 2012) that undermines ideas of legitimacy and worth where the work of the teachers 'enables the education institution to both project an image of diversity and avoid the material requirements of decolonising' (Gerrard, Sriprakash, and Rudolph 2022, 436). For example, where Teacher 1 received positive feedback and thanks for their work in developing an Indigenous studies curriculum alongside feedback that devalued the intellectual demand of the subject, and ultimately its position in curriculum hierarchies. There remains a need to challenge education as a force of social reproduction, or indeed merely as a track to upward social mobility (Sriprakash 2023, 783) as intimated by Mentor 2 and Principal 1. Furthermore, the resilience teachers have developed, for example Teachers 1 and 2 to navigate the stigma of incompetence (Niemann 2012), or, for example, the strategies employed to defend legitimacy, such as Mentor 2's careful wording choices when speaking about the pathway, resonates with experiences relevant to other First Nations ITE pathways where such actions are necessary to 'fit in' and 'play the game' to advance within the system while simultaneously attempting to change the system (Marom 2019, 332).

Despite consensus from participants that they were motivated by an obligation for social change, our analysis highlights that structures within which the participants operate appear to delimit their reparative aims. Significantly, the endemic racism structures perpetuate is reflected in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous narratives, such as Teacher 2's and Principal 1's references to dysfunction. These seemingly 'everyday' language slippages appear small but are representative of broader structural and systemic challenges that sit beyond the pathway itself. Here, the past is 'not over' (Rudolph 2016, 786) and as such, will continue to shape the lives to come of teachers and their students.

Conclusion

Sriprakash's (2023) call to action is that 'the lens of reparations not only asks us to actively recognise forms of injustice, it also asks what such injustice requires of us: how we should address it' (p. 786). Where a lens of reparative activism highlights a shared obligation for social change, the logic of elimination, and its persistent, albeit shifting modality (Moodie and Fricker 2023, 23), indicates that intersecting discourses of legitimacy serve to impede, rather than assist, this change. Whilst not seeking to diminish the gains that have been made through reparative activism over the time of the pathway's operation, we contend that a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ongoing interactions between settler-colonialism and reparative activism is required. Noting the undeniable past-present-future relationship the pathway and its supporting sites and systems have with colonial histories, and present educational wrongs, it is critical that we are not naive to this relationship in looking to future possibilities that seek to demand, and not diminish, the legitimacy of First Nations peoples as teachers, leaders and complex knowledge holders. Specifically, this requires us to address the everyday implicit and explicit experiences of First Nations peoples to ensure much more than a restorative gloss to the future of First Nations education in Australia, for both students and their teachers.

Notes

1. In this paper, we refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia as 'First Nations peoples'. We do so to acknowledge their sovereign position in Australia but also recognise this is our personal preference that may not be shared by all. At times, other terms may be used reflecting the source terminology. In particular, the term 'Indigenous' is commonly used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the area our study is situated reflecting the histories connected to peoples and places that are evident in language use.
2. Following the Government implementation of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Act 1897*, members from Aboriginal groups were displaced into this mission, the start of a long history of life under protection acts.
3. The Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE) students is designed to assess initial teacher education students' personal literacy and numeracy skills to ensure teachers are well equipped to meet the demands of teaching. It was first implemented as a national requirement in 2016 and in 2024, after the data collection for this project, recognition of First Nations language proficiency by a relevant cultural authority was

introduced as an acceptable alternative standard to the LANTITE. The impact of this recent development for First Nations language speakers in ITE is yet to be determined.

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Disclosure statement

ORCID

Peta Salter 🔾 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4643-734X
Carly Steele 🔾 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4587-1654

Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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