

Cultural safety

Develop cultural responsiveness to meet the learning needs and aspirations of First Nations students

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All students have the right to learn in safe environments where they can participate, feel valued and be recognised for their learning success.

Australian schools should be places where students from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds are respected and their knowledge, histories and cultures are valued. Australian schools are located on the lands of First Nations peoples who have cared for Country for over 60,000 years. Developing learning environments where people from all backgrounds are valued and respected requires teachers to be reflexive and responsive. Reflexivity is a tool that facilitates critical examination of your own personal attitudes, values, biases and assumptions.

This practice guide will help you understand how to:

- develop responsiveness by engaging in reflexive practice to examine your own culture, history, biases and assumptions, and the impact of these on your teaching
- build relationships of trust and learn about the perspectives, needs and aspirations of others
- develop and continually strengthen culturally responsive practices to address the needs of the diverse community of your school, helping to build learning environments where everyone feels safe and included.

Develop cultural responsiveness to meet the learning needs and aspirations of First Nations students

(*Cultural safety*) is one of 18 interconnected practices in our [Teaching for How Students Learn model of learning and teaching](#). This practice sits in the **Enabling** phase, which focuses on responsive, respectful relationships in a culturally safe, learning-focused environment. This practice is interconnected with:

- **Planning**, which focuses on developing and using a sequenced and structured plan for the knowledge and skills students will acquire
- **Instruction phase**, which focuses on managing students' cognitive load as they process and acquire new learning
- **Gradual release**, which focuses on maximising students' opportunities to retain, consolidate and apply their learning.

Enabling

Planning

Instruction

Gradual release

Understanding this practice

These lists describe the processes needed to develop your practice in ways that build culturally safe learning environments, and potential misapplications in practice.



What it is

- Valuing the diverse experiences, cultures and aspirations of all students in your classes.
- Commitment to identifying and eliminating barriers to ensure all students can participate equitably and feel valued and included.
- Incorporating diverse perspectives in learning content and using learning materials that reflect a diversity of cultural experiences.
- Being open and responsive to feedback from students, families, communities and colleagues to help you maintain an equitable, culturally safe learning environment.
- Continually developing, applying and strengthening your reflexive and responsive skills.



What it isn't

- A 'one-size-fits-all' process. There is no one 'right' way to achieve a culturally safe learning environment because it requires you to be reflexive and responsive.
- Restricting students to having to choose between either pursuing academic success or sustaining their identity and cultural knowledge.
- Requiring or expecting students and families to share their cultural knowledge and experience with you, or to 'teach' you about their culture. People may choose to share information if you have a relationship of trust, but they aren't required to. Some cultural knowledge can't be shared.
- An 'add-on' to your work as a teacher – developing a culturally safe learning environment supports learning.
- Only beneficial for First Nations students. Being culturally responsive involves a commitment to equity and valuing diverse experiences, cultures and aspirations, which supports the learning of all students.
- A static endpoint – cultural safety hinges on continual adaptation and strengthening of your approach as you demonstrate ongoing responsiveness and reflexivity.
- Only about eliminating overt or explicit forms of discrimination. Racism and discrimination are entrenched, systemic issues that can create barriers to participation in education.

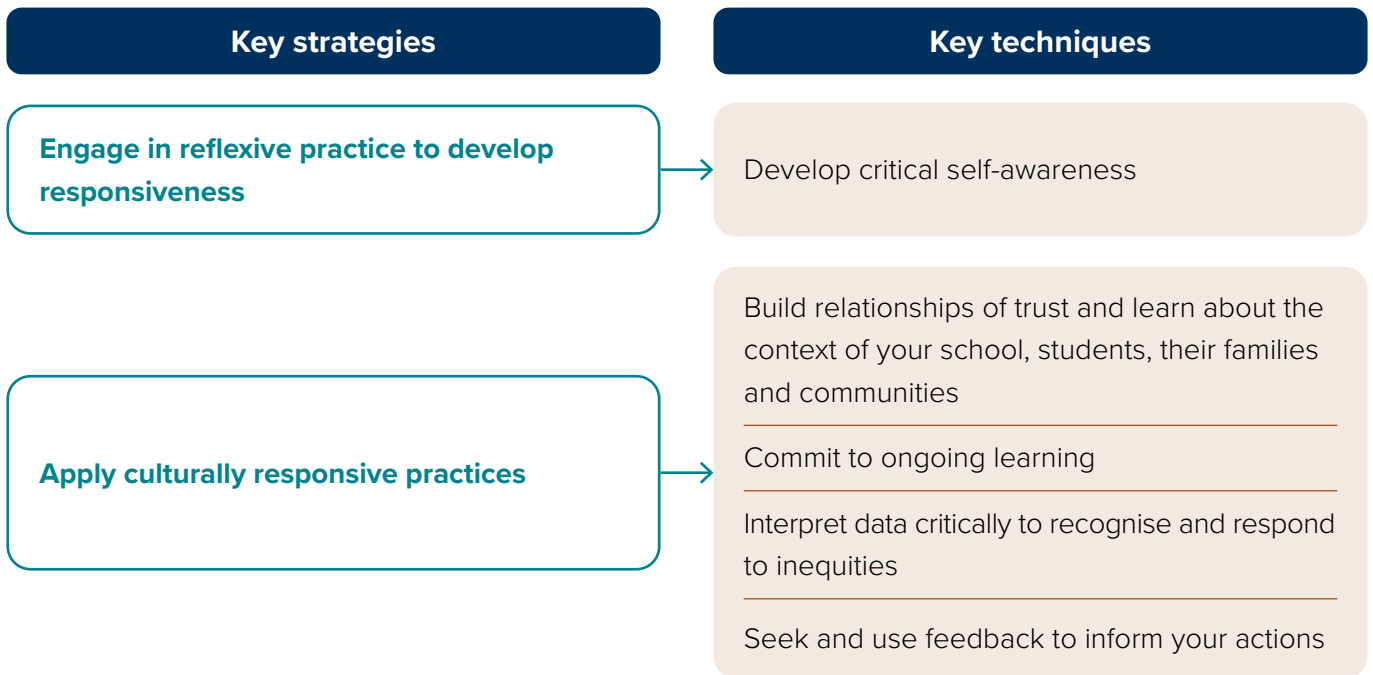
Key points from the research

- Culturally safe learning environments are psychologically, socially, physically, spiritually and emotionally safe for students, their families and their communities. A culturally safe environment is one where there is no threat to, assault on, challenge or denial of cultural identity.^{1,2,3}
- Cultural safety is a human right,^{4,5} and is a requirement of Australia's National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. These national principles require schools and teachers to protect the wellbeing and equity of all children and young people.⁶ A teacher can't determine whether a learning environment is culturally safe – instead the students, families and communities of a school need to determine whether they feel safe.
- Teachers can create culturally safe learning environments by being culturally responsive.⁷ Although cultural responsiveness is a relatively new field of research, the literature includes many examples of promising approaches. Most commonly, the literature identifies reflexivity as an emerging theme across models of cultural responsiveness.
- Developing and practising reflexive skills supports teachers in becoming responsive by helping them understand and question their own biases, assumptions, values and attitudes. Through reflexivity and responsiveness, teachers can more readily identify barriers to equity, recognise and value diversity, and foster the creation of culturally safe learning environments.^{8,9,10}
- Holding and supporting consistently high learning and behavioural expectations can support equity for all students to meet their needs and aspirations. It can also prevent the reinforcement of damaging stereotypes, which may manifest in a deficit view of some students and lowered expectations.^{11,12,13}
- High expectations relationships combine the belief of high expectations with the behaviours and dispositions needed to create a supportive learning environment. This requires teachers to:
 - understand and critically reflect on their assumptions and the ideas that inform them
 - create space for ongoing dialogue and learning
 - engage in challenging conversations and develop and strengthen an approach to teaching that fosters trust, emphasises strengths and promotes a positive student identity.¹⁴
- Connection to Country is inherent to belonging, wellbeing and identity for First Nations students,¹⁵ and learning about and from Country can benefit all students. Country is a term often used by First Nations peoples to describe connection to lands, waterways and seas. The term contains complex ideas about place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity.¹⁶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures have been included as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum¹⁷ to ensure all students can recognise and respect First Nations peoples' history, cultures, knowledge and understanding. Country is a key concept within this priority and is essential in each of the learning areas.
- Context-relevant learning tasks can support culturally safe learning environments by recognising and valuing the diverse cultural identities of students.¹⁸ Teachers can work in consultation with families and communities to support students by acknowledging and incorporating their language, experiences and values into teaching and learning, using these as a foundation to guide learning from familiar to new concepts.^{19,20}
- Students, families and communities may have different aspirations and definitions of success in learning, and these should be recognised, understood and respected.^{21,22}

Key strategies and techniques

This section describes key strategies and techniques (see summary in Figure 1) that can support you to be reflexive and responsive to the diversity of your school community.

Figure 1: Key strategies and techniques for building culturally safe learning environments



Engage in reflexive practice to develop responsiveness

Develop critical self-awareness

Be reflexive to critically examine your biases, assumptions, values and attitudes and how they impact your teaching and learning. By practising reflexivity, you are able to recognise how your actions and beliefs impact the learning experiences of students and question whether your assumptions promote or compromise student equity. This can include:

- questioning what you know, believe and value
- understanding how you have come to know those things and formed values
- critically analysing what you still need to know and develop.

Being reflexive also allows you to recognise how the experiences, knowledges and assumptions students bring to their learning may differ from your own. Recognising difference and questioning how you view difference are important steps in developing and strengthening responsive practice.

Cultural safety – and the reflexive, responsive approach that supports it – can't be developed through one training session or a short-term commitment. Fostering and maintaining a culturally safe approach is an ongoing process, with continual work informed by what you learn:

- about yourself
- about the students, families and colleagues you're working with
- from assessing the impact and effectiveness of your practice.

Working within communities of practice and with critical friends can support your ongoing reflexivity and learning.

Apply culturally responsive practices

Applying evidence-based teaching practices that align with [how students learn](#) ensures all students are supported to experience learning success. While [culturally responsive teaching practice](#) is an emerging area of research, there are promising approaches developed by First Nations communities that seem to improve student outcomes or create culturally safe learning environments. These promising approaches emphasise:

- building relationships founded on trust and respect
- learning about the context of your school, students, families and communities
- being reflexive and responsive to create learning environments that are culturally safe.

More research will help to identify additional, specific techniques you can use to implement evidence-based practices integrated within culturally safe learning environments.

Build relationships of trust and learn about the context of your school, students, their families and communities

[Build respectful relationships](#) with students, families and communities based on trust. Display authenticity by being genuine, transparent and open. Listen actively and gain understanding of the perspective of others, rather than probing for cultural information. It's important not to assume cultural experience, or to assume all people within a group are alike. In the case of First Nations communities, there is rich diversity, reflecting numerous differences in histories, language, lifestyles and experiences. A culturally safe learning environment draws on difference as strength and ensures that students are able to participate in ways that are relevant, meaningful and authentic to their lives and identities. This involves recognising and valuing the diverse sources of knowledge students bring to their learning, which you can learn about through relationship building and providing opportunities for culturally safe sharing if a student or family chooses to do so.

Being approachable, transparent and open to discussion will support your learning and relationship building. Listen to questions from students, families and community with an open mind, value their perspectives and apply a reflexive approach as you determine how to respond.

Commit to ongoing learning

Reflexive practices and developing responsiveness provide scope for you to tailor your approach as you work with students, families and colleagues. They can guide you to determine how to strengthen and maintain culturally safe learning environments. Engage with your colleagues and community to learn what has worked well within your local area and learn from stories of practice about what has been effective elsewhere. To take action to apply what you're learning, you can:

- Prioritise learning about respectful engagement with First Nations communities, including [protocols for culturally respectful engagement](#).
- Commit to your ongoing development, using the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's [self-reflection tool](#), [cultural responsiveness continuum](#) and [capability framework](#).
- Develop communities of practice and critical friends to provide an environment where ideas, beliefs and values are tested and ideas can be challenged.
- Identify relevant information to include in your teaching. For example, the [Ngarrngga project](#) has developed a range of curriculum resources for teachers, created in collaboration with Indigenous Knowledge Experts.
- Provide opportunities to learn about and connect with Country for the benefit of all students. Teaching about Country is required in the [Curriculum](#) and can foster a sense of shared connection among students who live and learn on the lands of First Nations peoples. Encourage students to think about the relationship between people and places, and ways to understand and care for each other and our world.

Interpret data critically to recognise and respond to inequities

As well as learning from students, families and colleagues, data can help you identify areas where cultural safety needs to be strengthened. When considering data, be reflexive and responsive to ensure that you don't apply a deficit view of any individual or groups. Work with community and your colleagues to look for patterns in school data regarding academic achievement and progress, support services and use of behavioural interventions. Consider whether some students may be over-represented or under-represented in behavioural interventions and academic achievements. Critically reflect on potential explanations for any patterns, and consider ways to respond that are responsive, safe and relevant to the context you're working in. Discuss with colleagues, families and community how any barriers to equitable participation in learning and schooling may be removed. Maintain trust and show respect by being open and transparent about how data is collected, analysed and used.

Seek and use feedback to inform your actions

Members of the school community determine whether classrooms, schools, practices, policies, organisations or systems are culturally safe for them. Draw on your relationships with students, families and colleagues to seek feedback on your practice. Feedback can deepen your reflexivity because it may uncover assumptions and biases that impact your teaching. You don't need to respond to all feedback immediately. Instead, develop and apply reflexive practices to critically examine and consider how you can use feedback to further strengthen your practice and your approach to relationships. Share your plans with those who have provided feedback, helping to reinforce a reciprocal approach.

First Nations community members who highlight the benefits of responsiveness in schools to build cultural safety, urge teachers to seek and respond to feedback as they strengthen their approach. For example, consider this advice:

I would rather hear that an educator has tried something and got it wrong than not tried something. For me, I think it's about empowering educators to take risks. We're not going to do everything perfectly. It's a challenging job. It's complex work. But I think that we need to understand that and reward people's risk-taking and ability to try. The other end of that, though, is if we do hear that we're getting it wrong, to respond and make the necessary change, but to continue doing these things. I think it's the only way, as a nation, that we are going to break this cycle about not knowing each other, is through really high-quality education in this space.

– Joe Sambono, Ngarrngga project²³

Include students, families and community in celebrating successes in strengthening cultural safety, ensuring mutual recognition and benefit. What constitutes success should be defined collaboratively, and no individual should benefit exclusively from or claim credit for successes that have been built collaboratively.

Seek opportunities to share and discuss your experiences of embedding First Nations peoples' perspectives and concepts in your teaching with others to generate further understanding. You might do this within your regional networks in communities of practice and by participating in relevant research projects. It's important that sharing occurs with the knowledge and support of the students and families that you're working with to avoid compromising cultural safety.

Developing your practice*

Consider what's informing your current practices, expectations and beliefs. Use these questions to reflect, make a plan to develop your practice and seek feedback to monitor the impact for your students.

- Culturally safe learning environments require you to be responsive to the needs of others. What steps are you taking to create an environment where all students feel valued, supported and empowered to improve their own learning? How will you know if your approach is effective?
- How do learning materials and content in your classroom reflect diverse histories, cultures and identities? How could you strengthen diversity further?
- What expectations do you hold for the learning success of your students? Why do you hold these expectations? How does your thinking impact your planning and practice? How does it impact what you expect from students during the learning process? How does it impact students' likelihood of success?
- How do you learn about what students, families and the school community expect from you and the school? How do you seek and respond to their ideas and feedback?

*Reflexive practice (reflexivity) is a process that critically examines personal attitudes, values and biases, with a view to becoming a more self-aware and effective teacher. Through reflexive practice, teachers educators and school leaders can appraise and evaluate how their behaviours and ideas influence their teaching and learning.²⁴

Further reading

Dia, M., Livermore, E., Ross, N., Staines, J., Tamwoy, N., Wilson, J., & Vickery, D. (2023.). *Reflect, respect, respond: Protocols for culturally respectful engagement with First Nations communities*. Australian Government. <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/culturally-respectful-engagement-for-learning-communities/protocols-for-culturally-respectful-engagement-with-first-nations-communities>

This guide was developed by Be You with a panel of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators from across Australia. It includes practical information, reflections, case studies, reflective questions and suggested actions as a starting point for creating safe, welcoming and culturally responsive learning communities.

Ngarrngga Project, The University of Melbourne. (n.d.). *Curriculum resources*. <https://www.ngarrngga.org/curriculum>

This First Nations-led project provides free, high-quality curriculum resources and professional development modules created by educators in collaboration with Indigenous Knowledge Experts. These resources span all subject areas from Years 3 to 10 and are designed to support teaching students about First Nations histories and cultures.

Price, K., & Rogers, J. (Eds.). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education: An introduction for the teaching profession* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108552905>

This book provides context and anecdotes about real-world issues, as well as practical strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at early childhood, primary and secondary levels. It contains chapters written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, who relate their personal and professional experiences.

Purdie, N., Milgate, G., & Bell, H. R. (Eds.). (2011). *Two way teaching and learning: Toward culturally reflective and relevant education*. ACER Press.

This book provides practical resources for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the classroom, including essential practices for working with Indigenous students and developing an Indigenous-focused curriculum. It also examines how racism impacts student learning and wellbeing and how teachers can address the issue of racism in their classrooms.

Shay, M., & Oliver, R. (Eds.). (2023). *Indigenous education in Australia: Learning and teaching for deadly futures*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429263453>

This book is based on research and practice focused on improving the schooling experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It provides effective strategies for the classroom, including specific skill sets related to pedagogy and curriculum development for embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives.

Endnotes

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- 4 United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- 5 United Nations. (2007). *Declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>
- 6 Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). *National principles for child safe organisations*. <https://childsafe.humanrights.gov.au/national-principles/download-national-principles>
- 7 Australian Education Research Organisation. (2024). *Cultural responsiveness in education*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/summaries-explainers/research-summaries/cultural-responsiveness-education>
- 8 AERO (2024)

- 9 Kilcullen, M., Swinbourne, A., & Cadet-James, Y. (2018). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing: Social, emotional wellbeing and strengths-based psychology. *The Clinical Psychologist*, 22(1), 16–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cp.12112>
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- 12 Miller, L., & Steele, C. (2021). Teaching and learning: There is no one right way, but there are right things to do. In M. Shay & R. Oliver (Eds.), *Indigenous education in Australia: Learning and teaching for deadly futures*. Routledge.
- 13 Morrison, A., Rigney, L.-I., Hattam, R., & Diplock, A. (2019). *Toward an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy: A narrative review of the literature*. University of South Australia. <https://apo.org.au/node/262951>
- 14 Sarra, C., Spillman, D., Jackson, C., Davis, J., & Bray, J. (2020). High-expectations relationships: A foundation for enacting high expectations in all Australian schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 49(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2018.10>
- 15 Harrison, N., & Skrebneva, I. (2020). Country as pedagogical: Enacting an Australian foundation for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(1), 15–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1641843>
- 16 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2022). *Welcome to Country*. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/welcome-country>
- 17 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2023). *Australian Curriculum V9*. <https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>
- 18 Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Carlson, B. (2016). The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian identity within education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19(4), 784–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.969224>
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- 23 Ngarrngga. (n.d.). Episode 1: The activism that paved the way for Ngarrngga [video]. In *Ngarrngga professional development series*. <https://www.ngarrngga.org/professional-development/the-activism-that-paved-the-way-for-ngarrngga>
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