



# Professional Practice

## Standard 4 – Environment

## Significant Episode: Teacher–student connection

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### *Finding 4.1: Connections*

*Recognise that learning happens most effectively when relationships between learners and teachers are positive, and when connections between family and school are mutually supportive.*

### **Cluster Question**

How can teachers improve mathematics outcomes for Indigenous learners?

### **Background**

Peter, a Year 7 Aboriginal boy, was a quiet member of the class. His literacy skills were still developing so any mathematics that relied on the written word was difficult for him to access effectively. He never volunteered answers or questions in the whole class setting and was reluctant to discuss his work one on one.

### **What happened?**

The school undertook training in cultural awareness to assist staff to make better connections with the Indigenous children in the school. Early sessions were fairly general and were intended to develop in the staff an understanding that Aboriginal children in urban schools do have cultural connections and backgrounds that need to be considered if schools are to effectively meet their learning needs. As the project progressed there was more and more focus on creating effective relationships with children in the classroom so that the children felt secure enough to take risks and to show what they know and can do.

Parallel to the cultural effectiveness training undertaken by the teachers was access to mathematics professional learning. This included input sessions and a process of action learning. Teachers selected one aspect of their mathematics teaching to focus on, then progressively made changes in their teaching to make it more effective in that area.

### **Results**

The cultural effectiveness training made me consider Peter's classroom behaviour through the lens of his cultural background. As the school engaged in more teaching and learning about Aboriginal culture and history, Peter began to show pleasure and pride in sharing his background with his classmates. As teachers were more aware of the importance of building effective relationships with our Aboriginal students the level of trust in these relationships encouraged more risk taking (asking and answering questions).

In Peter's classroom the focus was initially on effective questioning in mathematics. It became apparent that it was not just the quality of the questions that impacted on learning but the spread of questions to children in the class and the types of questions being asked. As new techniques were being implemented, Peter's behaviour in mathematics lessons changed. When the expectation was made that all children would provide a response to a question Peter began volunteering more in class, making it possible to check his understanding of a topic. His participation was scaffolded by the teacher in small ways to make his success

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more likely. If he had the correct answer in his book he would be called on early in the discussion. If he did not have the correct answer he would be given more time to listen to the other students before being prompted to contribute.

Another strategy for involving all the students in the lessons was to use small group tasks. Peter was more active in these small groups and more prepared to speak and share his ideas. Over time he took on a leadership role when working in these groups and would be the team member who would seek clarification from the teacher if the group needed more direction.

### **Other findings**

A classroom environment where the participation of every student is expected and is scaffolded by timely questions and structures that allow for small group discussion prior to whole class sharing support risk taking and active participation in learning mathematics.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Indigenous students learn best in classroom environments where teachers work to build relationships of trust with the learners. These students need opportunities to practise skills before being expected to perform in front of the class. Small groups allow Indigenous learners to participate in cooperative learning and both receive and provide peer support and ask questions. Teacher expectations need to be high and made explicit.

### **References**

Lingard, B., Hayes, D., Mills, M., & Chrisite, P. (2003). Leading learning: Making hope practical in schools. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

### **Some questions to prompt discussion:**

1. *What do you think are the most significant elements of this story in developing conditions to improving learning of Aboriginal learners?*
2. *What might be Peter's particular learning preferences?*
3. *What other interesting or important aspects are in this Significant Episode?*

