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## Lessons from the AIME approach to the teaching relationship: valuing biepistemic practice

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### Abstract

The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) is a national, extra-curricular mentoring programme that is closing the educational gap for young Indigenous Australians. So what is AIME doing that is working so well? This article draws on a large-scale classroom ethnography to describe the pedagogies that facilitate the teacher-student relationships in this programme. We use Shawn Wilson's theorisation of Indigenous ways of knowing in order to 'unpack' how these approaches succeeded in creating the egalitarian and trust-filled relationships reportedly experienced in the AIME programme.

### Keywords

biepistemic, valuing, practice, relationship, teaching, approach, aime, lessons

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## Abstract

The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) is a national, extra-curricular mentoring program that is closing the educational gap for young Indigenous Australians. So what is AIME doing that is working so well? This article draws on a large-scale classroom ethnography to describe the pedagogies that facilitate the teacher-student relationships in this program. We use Shawn Wilson's theorisation of Indigenous ways of knowing in order to 'unpack' how these approaches succeeded in creating the egalitarian and trust-filled relationships reportedly experienced in the AIME program.

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## **Lessons from the AIME approach to the teaching relationship: valuing biepistemic practice**

### **Abstract**

The Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) is a national, extra-curricular mentoring program that is closing the educational gap for young Indigenous Australians. So what is AIME doing that is working so well? This article draws on a large-scale classroom ethnography to describe the pedagogies that facilitate the teacher-student relationships in this program. We use Shawn Wilson's theorisation of Indigenous ways of knowing in order to 'unpack' how these approaches succeeded in creating the egalitarian and trust-filled relationships reportedly experienced in the AIME program.

### **Key words**

Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), teacher-student relationships, power, epistemology, Indigenous Australians, Shawn Wilson, relationality

### **Introduction**

Power, and particularly perceived power imbalances between teachers and students, is a problematic of schooling often interrogated by educational sociologists (Harwood 2006; Youdell 2011). Critique of this power dynamic is levelled via analyses focused by post-structural theory (e.g. Davies 2006; Harwood 2006; McMahon 2013; Youdell 2011), discipline and authority (e.g. Macleod, MacAllister and Pirrie 2012), gender (e.g. Crump 1990; Read 2008), inclusion (e.g. Allan 1996), space (e.g. McGregor et al. 2004) and democracy (e.g. Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012). One of the key tasks established in these critiques is to address power imbalances in the teacher-student relationships and to build on processes that develop and affirm engagement in education. For instance, scholarship on alternative schooling shows how relationships between teachers and students can become less polarised by power differentials (e.g. Humphry 2014; Kennedy 2011; McGregor 2004). This prompts the problem of how it may be possible for teachers to relinquish or change positions of power or authority while at the same time sustaining professionalism and have a 'well managed' classroom. In such a scenario, what could an effective classroom with egalitarian teacher-student relationships look like?

In this article we offer an illustration of pedagogies used in the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME); pedagogies that we suggest demonstrate the potential for effective egalitarian teacher-student relationships. While the focus of this article is our fieldwork with AIME, we wish to acknowledge from the outset the diversity of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> led work that draws on and applies rich knowledge traditions<sup>2</sup> to engage and successfully teach young people. Our view is that there is an alarming lack of awareness of such successful approaches and limited engagement in learning from the application of these important knowledge traditions. Respectfully then, our work hopes to contribute to addressing this imbalance in ‘mainstream’ awareness. Responding to the critique of the power-imbalance and how this can impact student engagement and retention, this article sets out to show how certain pedagogies are used in classroom instruction designed and lead by AIME for Indigenous young people in Australia. To do so, we explore how Indigenous epistemologies, or ways of knowing, underscoring the AIME educational context seem to delimit possibilities for teacher-student relationships stratified by power differentials.

In arguing that Western educators have much to learn from Indigenous education and epistemologies, there is an urgent call for educators to explore *how to* traverse, learn from and practice using more than one knowledge system (e.g. Marika, Ngurruwutthun & White 1992, Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009). In colonised countries such as Australia (as well as others such as the United States of America, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand) there is a well-argued need for teachers to become ‘biepistemic practitioners capable of working through a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations’ (Hodson 2012, cited in Kitchen and Raynor 2013, 56). We use the term biepistemic practice to mean the ability to respectfully acknowledge and draw on both Western<sup>3</sup> and Indigenous ways of knowing in *teaching practice*. We will demonstrate that AIME educators are skilful and effective biepistemic practitioners. Before doing so, it is necessary to first pause and differentiate between plausible linguistic interpretations and intended meanings and application of the term ‘biepistemic’. The prefix ‘bi’ denotes ‘two’, *but we are not* asserting here a distinct binary of ‘homogenous Western’ or ‘homogeneous Indigenous’ epistemologies; rather our starting is point is these are heterogeneous (heterogeneous Western and heterogeneous Indigenous). We acknowledge and celebrate that just as there are many ways of knowing in the West, there are diverse and multiple ways of knowing in Indigenous cultures both internationally and nationally within settler states. Moreover, there are plentiful subtle points of commonality and tension in interactions between Indigenous and Western epistemologies (e.g. McKnight 2015, Nakata 2007,

Yunkaporta 2009). However, in schooling systems different knowledges and epistemologies are, problematically, not afforded similar values or status and in our view, this directly impacts educational equity.

Educational disadvantage for Indigenous students is commonly attributed to incongruities between the epistemologies of Indigenous and Western education (e.g., Castango and Brayboy 2008; Cherubini et al. 2010; Curwen Doige 2003; Ireland 2009; Smith 2012; Yunkaporta 2009). Battiste (1998, 20), conceptualises the sustained privileging of colonial and Eurocentric over Indigenous epistemologies in all aspects of schooling as ‘cognitive imperialism’; similarly Brayboy and Castango (2009) deploy notions of assimilation and power struggles to understand the problem. In this way, Indigenous epistemologies or ‘ways of knowing’ have been ‘subjugated’ (Foucault 1980) in the field of Western education (e.g. Purdie and Buckley 2010). According to Foucault, subjugated knowledges are those that have been wrongly afforded a diminished status of, or silenced, ‘beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity’ (Foucault 1980, 81-82) set out by a given discipline. If Foucault’s work positions the power/knowledge problem of subjugating Indigenous knowledges at a systemic, discursive and disciplinary level, Miranda Fricker’s (2007) work closely considers the injustice perpetuated and felt by specific individual epistemic practices (e.g. personal processes such as conveying knowledge to others by speech and making meaning of social experiences) within such social contexts. Fricker describes these epistemic injustices as “testimonial injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge; and hermeneutical injustice, in which someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding” (p.7). Notwithstanding the efforts of culturally responsive and inclusive individual education professionals and staff, this subjugation of Indigenous knowledges and subsequent ‘wronging’ of Indigenous knowers is a persistent problem within schooling systems. In this context of injustice, while we acknowledge diverse epistemologies, summative nomenclature such as ‘Western’ and ‘Indigenous’ epistemology, and ‘biepistemic practice’ are strategic descriptors in this article.

Crucially, this article takes an approach that distances itself from deficit accounts and seeks to ‘un-subjugate’ Indigenous epistemologies or ‘ways of knowing’ in the field of education. We draw on Indigenous high school students’ and AIME staff’s personal stories and experiences of AIME to erode colonial misrepresentations and deficit approaches through a ‘restorying’ (Corntassel, et al., 2009) of Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching and learning. As stated

above, we contend there is much for Western educators to learn from Indigenous ways of knowing, especially in reconceptualising and alternative practices for the otherwise problematically hierarchical teacher-student relationship.

As we will outline, biepistemic practice holds potential for shifting the power dynamic in teacher-student relationships. Thinking through the teacher-student relationship using more than one way of knowing affords an opportunity to challenge Western understandings of relationships as solely interpersonal and imbued with power dynamics. Part of this shift involves bringing relationship with Country/environment/land into the teacher-student relationship dynamic. Yunkaporta (2009) and McKnight (2015) have explored this respectful meeting of Western and Indigenous pedagogies. Their work emphasises how the land (land links) or Country is the important knowledge tradition that guides the process, reducing the reliance on human power relationships. Building on this argument, through its attention to reducing power imbalances in pedagogic relationships, we venture to suggest that learning from the lessons of biepistemic practice has the capacity to contribute to *improved inclusion for all students*. This is especially because negative teacher-student relationships are often cited as a key factor in young people's disengagement from education, generally (Bodkin-Andrews, Denson & Bansel 2013; Duffy and Elwood 2013; Hattam and Smyth 2003; Humphry 2014; Lumby 2012; McMahan, Harwood & Hickey-Moody 2015; Pomeroy 1999; Smyth and McInerney 2006).

We begin by recasting the problem of power imbalances in the teacher-student relationship by discussing how Indigenous ways of knowing contribute to a better understanding of 'teaching relationships'. Following this discussion, we foreground the AIME mentoring program and describe how the approach used in this program distances itself from power-imbued nomenclature of 'teachers' and 'students'<sup>4</sup>. We then outline our study methodology which involved interviews with 143 Indigenous high school students and a classroom ethnography of 150 AIME sessions, across Australia. Our fieldwork with this program included research in all the Australian states and the territory where the program is delivered. We then move to the main part of the article, where we provide richly descriptive examples of how AIME uses Indigenous ways of knowing in Western classroom contexts and provides an instructive example of teaching 'biepistemically'. Discussion of our findings is framed using Opaskwayak Cree scholar, Shawn Wilson's (2008) theorisation of Indigenous 'relationality', an approach which supports an analysis of the Indigenous high school students' emphasis on

relationships in their experience of AIME. Drawing on our extensive ethnography of AIME classrooms, we describe elements of AIME's pedagogical approach that promote egalitarian teacher-student relationships. We show how, from the perspective of the Indigenous high school students, this is felt as an amelioration of power dynamics in the teacher-student relationship.

***Learning from Indigenous epistemologies – biepistemic practice as a pathway to more egalitarian teacher-student relationships***

There are many epistemologies, or ways of knowing. Yet, as described above, Western schooling tends to privilege one dominant way of knowing. The idea of teaching using multiple knowledges or more than one knowledge system (e.g., biepistemic practice) is juxtapositional to 'mainstream' educational thought. Knowledge, in Western educational scholarship, is commonly held as a collection of singularly true propositions or beliefs (Bonnett 2009; Lang 2011) to be learned, to fill one's mind with, and to impart to the minds of others. The popular uptake of outcomes-based education is testimony to this (Forster 1995). From our observations of AIME's Indigenous led classrooms, we contend that such approaches to knowledge (and, it follows, teaching and learning relationships) in Western schooling systems can only be enriched by also engaging with Indigenous epistemologies.

In discussions of Indigenous epistemologies, Western constructs of epistemology and ontology do not remain separate; they are understood and experienced as interconnected and inextricably linked. In this discussion when we talk of Indigenous epistemologies we are also including ontological considerations. Indigenous epistemologies are diverse and complex; they are often characterised by multiple layers of relationality or relatedness (Martin 2008; Wilson 2008). Here, 'relationality' and 'relatedness' are used as technical terms; terms that hold specific meaning in contexts of Indigenous epistemologies and this varies from more common usage. Wilson (2008) describes relationality as it is experienced in Indigenous ontology and epistemology, internationally, as comprising relations with people, environment/land, the cosmos, and ideas. These types of relations although described separately are understood as completely intertwined with each other. Karen Martin (2008), a respected Noonuccal scholar of Quandomoopah, highlights that stories and teachings may fluently interact with up to seven entities (e.g., People, Land, Animals, Plants), yet critically, relatedness moves beyond varying contexts to embrace important layers of reciprocity. Here,

reciprocity encapsulates not just the sharing of knowledges, but a clear understanding of a responsibility to ensure that knowledges protect, sustain, and strengthen both entities and also their relatedness to each other. Critically, relatedness becomes embodied in both the responsible sharing of, and sometimes the necessary silence of, stories as individuals progress through the varying layers of Laws, customs, and responsibilities linked to their very development.

Whilst the notions of relationality (Wilson, 2008) and relatedness (Martin, 2008) should be recognised as distinct themes, it may be argued that they are in part linked through an intrinsic emphasis on connectedness that ensures the survival of the peoples, lands, ancestral knowledges, and teachings. This connectedness is emphasised through a form of reciprocity that ensures that knowledges are passed on through a foundation, *a relational trust* that directly links the teacher to both the teachings and the learner. The focus of this discussion is Indigenous high school students' experiences of trust-filled relationships with AIME 'teachers' and so 'relations with people and ideas' are key to our analysis. Before we outline Wilson's (2008) theorisation of relations with people and ideas', we must first briefly rationalise why we are focusing on only this portion of this wider theorisation of Indigenous epistemology.

It is important to acknowledge that relationality with what Wilson calls environment/land and cosmos (spirit) are always part of AIME classrooms. Many Indigenous Australians recognise the relationality between environment/land and cosmos (spirit) as Country. Country *is* physical, mental and spiritual (Harrison and McConchie, 2009). This is one example of how multiple dimensions of relationality inform interpersonal relationships and ways of knowing at AIME, and further, this is different to the more dominant (Western) notions of relationships existing mostly between people. At AIME, Country is acknowledged, teachers' and students' stories name which Country they are from, as a national program, there is scope for some flexibility within sites for an approach that is respectful of the many Countries and Indigenous peoples in Australia. Such connections to Country are inherently connected to Cosmos (Wilson 2008) through the personal stories shared from AIME staff and special guests. AIME's curriculum content permits this feature to establish the importance of cultural pride, dealing with racism and overcoming hardships to implement the sharing and caring for spirit. In many instances, these stories emphasise not only how the presenters are linked to their culture and lands, but also to the lived experiences of the Indigenous students themselves.

Whilst relationality with Country and Cosmos is invariably integral to AIME's approach, attending to this comprehensively is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, the focus of the component of the study reported in this article was, as requested by AIME, to understand how the young Indigenous students became so engaged in AIME. This is of fundamental importance given the appallingly low results that mainstream education and further education is achieving with Australia's Indigenous people (e.g. ABS, 2012; SCRGSP, 2015; Purdie and Buckley, 2010; Thompson, De Bortoli and Buckley, 2013; O'Shea et al., 2016).

In their interviews, the AIME students report that the egalitarian and respectful qualities of the teacher-student relationships (i.e. their relationships with people) in AIME classrooms are key to their engagement in the program. In our AIME classroom ethnography, we perceived the pedagogies used to facilitate these relationships as qualitatively different to what we have observed and experienced throughout our previous research and/or professional experience in mainstream schools. We are careful here not to insinuate that the pedagogies AIME deploys are the only pedagogies, or even specifically Indigenous pedagogies, for achieving this outcome of egalitarian teacher-student relationships. Rather, we contend that the egalitarian pedagogical relationships at AIME may be understood through Wilson's theorisation of Indigenous ways of knowing, specifically, his theorisation of relations with people and ideas.

Wilson describes relationship building with people as of central importance to the 'everyday lives of most Indigenous people' worldwide (2008, 84). He points to the importance of cultural practices of developing shared relationships by talking about who you are and where you are from and sharing stories. One layer of Wilson's (2008) theorisation of relationality between people is storytelling. Worldwide, storytelling is a respected Indigenous modality that emphasises relationality through not only getting to know and trust one another, but also a process of sharing knowledge, working together and mutual learning (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Bodkin-Andrews, et al. in press; Wilson, 2008). In pedagogical literature oral storytelling is acknowledged as cultivating relationality and learning communities (e.g., Baskerville 2011; Phillips 2013) and classrooms that are culturally inclusive (Baskerville 2011).

Wilson (2008) also describes the 'relationality with ideas' in Indigenous epistemology. He does so by drawing on his friend's observation of the importance of the circle as a symbol for

Indigenous cultures worldwide. Wilson (2008, 92) explains how non-hierarchical relationships are at the foundation of Indigenous ontology and epistemology:

If reality is based upon relationships, then judgement of another person's viewpoint is inconceivable. One person cannot possibly know all of the relationships that brought about another's ideas. Making judgement of another's worth or value then is also impossible. Hierarchy in belief systems and social structure and thought are totally foreign to this way of viewing the world. Thus, egalitarianism and inclusiveness become not merely the norm but the epistemologically inevitable.

By extension, we will argue, power imbalances in the teacher-student relationship become impossible. We are not claiming that Indigenous teacher-student relationships are power-neutral; for example, learners' deference to Elders is paramount. Instead, we read Wilson's work to mean that there is a reciprocal and deep respect for each person's role within a pedagogic relationship (e.g. Elder and learner, teacher and student). It is this deep respect for each other's roles coupled with a cultural valuing of humility and generosity that results in an apparent egalitarianism, a lack of 'power struggle' or need to control or pass 'judgement' in pedagogic relationships. For example, some Elders, when sharing their personal lived experiences, humbly align these experiences to those of the students, thus emphasising a reciprocal and dialogical relatedness with learners (Doige 2003; Goulet and McLeod 2002; Paterson and Hart-Wasekeesikaw 1994). Indigenous scholars in Australia (Buckskin 2012) and internationally (e.g. Bishop et al. 2012; Brayboy and Castango, 2009) highlight the paucity of such respectful and egalitarian ways of teaching in schools and call for the role of relationships and people to be re-centred in Western schooling.

In describing the teacher-student relationship in AIME classrooms, we hope to render the pedagogies that support 'egalitarian and inclusive' classroom relationships as observable and learnable for those who may otherwise not find it such an 'epistemological inevitability' (Wilson 2008). Pedagogy is rarely thought through in terms of epistemology in contemporary educational research (Lang 2011; McKnight 2015; McMahan 2013). Whilst it might seem unusual to think through teachers' pedagogical choices epistemologically, we contend that the connection between these two concepts is direct. *How one comes to know something (one's epistemology) directly informs choices about how one does things (in this case teach a class).* A person's epistemology directly impacts their pedagogical decision-making (e.g., Harwood

& McMahon 2014, McMahon 2013, McMahon & Harwood, in press). For example, McKnight's (2015) paper offers a foundational work for understanding how Indigenous ontology and epistemology grounded in oneness and relationality engenders the very possibility of specific pedagogies for cultural learning (legacy pedagogies). He notes how these possibilities are delimited and rendered impossible within current treatment of knowledge in education, which he critiques as Western dualistic epistemological approaches. Adding to this scholarship, here we demonstrate how Indigenous epistemologies characterised by relationality allowed for a privileging of pedagogies that supported developing trust-filled and egalitarian 'teacher-student' relationships in AIME classrooms.

In discussion of the impact of epistemology on pedagogy that follows, we don't presume to 'dissect' AIME's approach to show which specific parts of it are drawn from Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. To do so would be to create artificial and inaccurate binaries (see discussion of 'biepistemic' above). Rather, based on our long-term research involvement, our biepistemic research team (authors Bodkin-Andrews, McKnight and Chandler are Indigenous scholars, authors McMahon, Harwood, O'Shea and Priestly are non-Indigenous scholars) continually recognises how AIME differs to mainstream schooling via its central positioning of Indigenous epistemologies. Paramount to this is the inclusion of lived experiences of Indigenous AIME staff and young people to the program's content and delivery. With this in mind, we agreed it was reasonable, and possibly useful, then to think through the data from an epistemological point of view.

### ***Why study AIME?***

In this paper we focus closely on the nature of AIME. AIME's evaluative research base (Harwood et al. 2013; KMPG 2013) and reports (AIME, 2016) demonstrates it is a nationwide initiative making progress in closing the education gap<sup>5</sup> for Indigenous Australians. AIME is an Indigenous mentoring program; however, it is *not* a university pathway or outreach program. AIME is a not-for-profit organisation that is independent of universities and so is uniquely positioned to work across educational institutions. The purpose of the AIME program is to support Indigenous students to *complete high school and transition to any positive post-school pathway of their choosing* (including university, further education or employment).

Delivered at university campuses across Australia, the AIME program targets Indigenous

students in Years 7 to 12 (approximately aged 12-18 years). The students engage with AIME via excursions to the university campuses (up to 5 days per year) where they meet with volunteer mentors, who are students at the host university. Additionally, AIME provides in-school support via homework programs called ‘tutor squads’ and delivers personalised transitional support for students between the end of high-school and their chosen positive post-school pathway. In total, during their high school years, students engaged with AIME have the opportunity to access 156 hours of mentoring and academic support (AIME, 2016). The AIME program curriculum is designed by and for Indigenous young people. The curriculum focuses on skills and values that support engagement in education; for example, respect, empathy for teachers, self-esteem, confidence and communication skills; goal-setting, time management and leadership. The program curriculum also focuses on cultural history and identity and promoting that ‘Indigenous = Success’ and there are many ways to be successful.

AIME has experienced extensive national growth, starting with only 25 mentors and 25 high school students at one university site in 2005. By 2015, 4,864 students from 325 high schools attended the program with 1,923 volunteer university student mentors, at 18 partnering universities across Australia (AIME, 2016). Such expansion is testimony to the program’s success (AIME 2016; Harwood et al., 2013; KPMG, 2013). There are now instances where Indigenous AIME students’ transition rates to the next scholastic year level out-perform Australia’s national, non-Indigenous transition rates (AIME, 2016). AIME’s success is impressive and worthwhile trying to understand more fully.

***An example of biepistemic practice: AIME’s montaged approach to pedagogic relationships***

Here, we suggest that AIME engages in biepistemic work by selecting concepts from multiple knowledges and practices to create a montaged, composite pedagogy<sup>6</sup> for a culturally responsive classroom. We suggest that AIME simultaneously: honours Indigenous, cultural understandings of the importance of teaching with and through relationships; recognises specific elements of Western mentoring and coaching programs as complementarily relational; and enacts a composition of these approaches within Western classroom contexts using knowledge garnered from AIME staff’s personal schooling experiences.

AIME innovates on widely accepted notions of who inhabits ‘the classroom’ and borrows from mentoring nomenclature to distance itself from Western education’s hierarchicalism of classroom roles. We now explain their terminology and highlight connections to dominant understandings of schools. *For the purpose of this paper on AIME’s pedagogical approach, one may read: ‘presenter’ as synonymous with teacher and; ‘mentee’ or ‘mentor’ as synonymous with student.*

The presenters are the AIME staff responsible for curriculum delivery. AIME seeks to ensure that presenters are young Indigenous Australian role models. The presenters are rarely qualified teachers but they are responsible for ‘standing out the front’ and facilitating classroom learning; they are teaching. As in school classrooms, each AIME classroom typically features one presenter and up to 30 ‘students’. The ‘students’ in the AIME classrooms are both the mentees and mentors.

As stated above, the mentees are Indigenous high school students, the mentors are university students from the host university. While the university student mentors are mostly non-Indigenous this is representative of current university student demographics (O’Shea et al., 2016). We note that such demographics are indicative of universities failing to engage and retain Indigenous students, which leads to low participation rates. In our observations of the AIME program we note that Indigenous university students are generous in giving their time to the AIME program. The mentors sit (normally in lecture theatres, or at tables in classrooms) with the mentees to encourage and support them through learning experiences led by the presenter. Although this requires some level of role modelling and coaching from the mentor, the AIME mentor-mentee relationship is not saturated with Western connotations of expert mentor transferring knowledge to an inexperienced mentee (e.g. Rogers, 2009; Zeind et al., 2005; O’Shea et al., 2016). Instead, the key ‘knowledge’ of the mentoring (i.e. the AIME curriculum) is delivered (or taught) by the presenter. *The mentor and mentee are positioned, both physically and via their pedagogic relationships and activities, as the presenters’ students.* Reports of mentees’ and mentors’ significant learning from AIME support such interpretation of their co-positioning as students in this learning environment (Bodkin-Andrews et al. 2013; Harwood et al. 2013, 2015; O’Shea et al., 2016).

## **Methodology**

The research was funded by Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIICCS RTE) and by the Australian Research Council grant DP140103690.<sup>7</sup> The project has university and state departments of education ethics approvals and complies with Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (2011) research protocols. This paper draws on a national classroom ethnography of the AIME program and related mentee interviews<sup>8</sup> to better understand how AIME's pedagogical approach fosters egalitarian presenter-mentee relationships.

### *About the classroom ethnography and interviews*

Data for this article is based upon classroom ethnography and interviews with Indigenous high school students attending AIME. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 143 mentees in scholastic Years 9 – 12 (either individually, or in small friendship groups). The interview questions focused on participants' experiences of AIME. The number of mentees interviewed at each site is at Table 1. One-hundred and fifty 'AIME sessions' (1-hour modules of work) were observed at 15 (out of AIME's 29) sites. Site selection ensured representation of each state and territory participating in the AIME program, and inclusion of regional and metropolitan campuses. Nine of the 15 campuses were 'focus sites' targeted for repeat visits from a single researcher to develop continuity and depth in the observational data. The six remaining 'additional sites' were observed for one-off visits (See Table 1). Researchers co-observed 27 (of the 150) sessions. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of data, researchers compared their observations at regular data meetings.

{{INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE}}

The observations were conducted according to Setting Theory foci and protocols. Barker's (1968) Setting Theory, originally part of a broader theory of 'Ecological Psychology', was adapted by teacher educators to offer a method useful for classroom ethnographies that focus on understanding pedagogy (Cambourne and Kiggins 2004; McMahon 2013). Observations involved describing and sequencing basic units of teaching behaviour called 'episodes' (Cambourne and Kiggins, 2004). Within each episode the ethnographer is seeking to observe: how the 'episode' starts and finishes and how it relates to other episodes (if at all); the mode of content delivery e.g. 'whole class focus discussions', 'group work', 'individual work' etc.; how the teacher is using paraphernalia and language; how s/he is communicating expectations; and how s/he is acting and moving. Importantly, how does all this appear to

impact the learning culture and the behaviour setting (classroom), as a whole? Additionally, Setting Theory field notes describe ‘space and place’ (how the classroom was used / what it looked like) and ‘human inhabitants’ (numbers, age and gender of teachers, presenters, researchers, mentees and mentors, special guests in the classroom).

### ***Data analysis procedures and theoretical framework***

Findings from analysis of the mentee interview data informed subsequent analysis of the observational data. This article focuses on analysis of 23 interviews with 47 mentees (i.e., approximately one third of the 143 mentees interviewed), in which the mentees directly compared AIME to school. Whilst not all mentees compared AIME with school, comparisons made were remarkably consistent. All such comments indicated a high regard for AIME’s pedagogical approach. The frequency and internal consistency of this ‘school / AIME’ theme was noteworthy because the interview schedule did not explicitly feature questions about this. When young people offered comparisons between AIME and school, the interviewers asked follow-up questions like, ‘what do you think makes AIME different to school?’ In 17 out of the 23 (approximately 74%) interview transcripts under analysis for this article, mentees’ responses to these questions focused on describing the relationships they experienced, especially relationships developed through trust. Field notes were then analysed to identify pedagogies that might reasonably contribute to the mentees’ self-reported experiences of AIME. The theoretical framework for discussion of this analysis is Shawn Wilson’s (2008) theorisation of relationality. The mentees interview responses and our observations were treated as a collective and placed into an orientation of relationship. The focus on relationships pointed to connections between people and curriculum in AIME and maintaining relationality in the research.

### **‘AIME is different to school’**

Yeah it’s a lot more chilled and laid back than school. (Rebecca, Year 10 female, Regional Victoria)

At AIME you feel more welcome [than school] because everyone’s happy and stuff. (Zeke, Year 10 male, Regional Victoria).

You still sit in a room [like at school] but its just different – it’s just like you do more fun stuff but you still learn. (Taj, Year 11, Regional NSW)

School’s more like strict and here’s like more free. (Charlotte, Year 9 female, Metropolitan ACT)

Understanding the mentee’s experience of AIME as, generally, more fun, chilled, relaxed, welcoming and freer than school is important. It is important because it points to the positive affects, at least in part, of AIME’s montaged pedagogical approach. At AIME, the mentees experienced and felt the familiar rituals and programs of the school classroom (for example, Taj’s comment above on ‘sitting in a room’ and ‘learn[ing]’) as different to and more desirable than school. When prompted to elaborate on how they perceived AIME as different to school, mentees’ responses focused on their experiences of positive, egalitarian relationships with presenters developed through trust.

### **Pedagogies for ‘trust-filled’ and egalitarian teacher-student (presenter-mentee) relationships**

Mentees’ comment regarding relationships experienced at AIME was unanimously positive. One of the key differences between AIME and school noted and valued by the mentees was a disruption of power dynamics experienced in teacher-student relationships at school. This is succinctly explained by Toby as follows:

I’d say that the presenters and people running it also try instead of being like authority figure try and like be more of your friend so that helps connect a lot with – with younger people who have a problem with authority. Especially like with people like school and stuff – like those reasons. (Toby, Regional Queensland – Year 11 male, Regional Queensland)

Similarly, the following conversations with Zac, Alfie and Kim reflects this positionality:

- Int      Okay. So what did you think before you came to AIME, like what were you expecting? Just anything.
- Z        Like actual school learning.
- A        Yeah like classroom kind of.

- Int And now what do you think ... what's it like now?  
Z It's like they're treating us like adults.  
Int Like adults.  
A Yeah. (Zac and Alfie, Year 10 males, Regional NSW)

And it's not like the student to teacher relationship with the staff. It's more like a friend-to-friend relationship. (Kim, Year 12 female, Metropolitan NSW)

Whether the mentees' perceived an 'adult-to-adult' or 'friend to friend' relationship, the above quotes explicate the prominent comments around lack of disparity in the power in the AIME presenter-mentee relationship. As Toby (above) points out, the AIME presenters were consistently cast by mentees as non-authoritative.

This perception by the young people of a 'levelling' or 'equalising' of presenter-mentee (teacher-student) to friend-friend power dynamics in the above quotes was initially perplexing as there is much ethnographic data to counter these claims. We observed the presenters standing out the front just as teachers do and delivering content using whole class, group work and individual instructional techniques, they without exception ran a very well 'managed' classroom (field notes, all). In this sense the presenters were all respected 'teachers'. Moreover, there were explicit AIME rules about presenters *not* befriending the mentees; for example, rules about no contact outside of AIME, no social media friends etc (e.g. field notes, 4 May, 9 May, 16 May 2014).<sup>9</sup>

So how is it done, this different egalitarian presenter-mentee relationship? After further analysis, we contend that this is achieved not by presenters relinquishing professionalism or befriending mentees but by respecting mentees and *letting them know they are trusted*. The AIME presenters developed trust-filled relationships with mentees by conferring messages of trust via specific pedagogical practices. The classroom ethnography demonstrates that AIME presenters communicated trust in the mentees by: demonstrating vulnerability; listening to and deeply valuing mentees' contributions to class discussion; and selecting and presenting learning materials that communicate high expectations of mentees.

### ***Vulnerability or 'humble connectivity'***

At the heart of the AIME presenter-mentee relationship is generosity and vulnerability, a recognition of the need to share something of yourself in order to connect. All presenters share stories from their life with the class, they tell mentees who they are, where they are from and some of their life experiences, ‘So I’m not just some random’ (presenter, field notes 12 September 2014). This is especially the case on occasions of the presenter taking a group for the first time (Field notes, all). In such relationship-building introductory storytelling, the presenters’ stories relate to AIME’s core content messages of valuing education, setting goals, perseverance, success, and overcoming adversity and racism (e.g. Field notes 6 May, 16 May, 9 August, 12 September 2014). Personal stories are also shared to demonstrate the presenters’ personal connection with content in curriculum stories (i.e. stories told in the text books or via audiovisual materials) (e.g., Field notes, 6 June, 28 July, 6, 9, 25, 27 August). This is illustrated in the following excerpt from our field notes:

*Whole class focus – presenter talk*

The presenter starts the session by introducing herself and telling her story. Her story centres on issues of the negative effects of stereotyping and racism regarding ‘what Indigenous Australians look like’ and the discrimination she faced in the school playground because of looking different to other family members. To illustrate this story she projected a photo of her and her siblings on the board. The story also highlighted how her aggressive response to one bully’s racism meant that she, as the victim, was the one who got into trouble with the principal.

*Whole class focus – video –Too Little Justice (2004)*

The short film was about a young Indigenous man who had just changed schools and was being ostracised by his new classmates. At lunch he went for a smoke behind the shed and was joined by another young man who seemed like a welcome and friendly face. The new ‘friend’ offered him some drugs (which at first were refused, but eventually were accepted). Then the ‘friend’ made racist comments at which point the new kid objected and identified himself as Aboriginal. A fight ensued because the ‘friend’ kept insisting that the new guy wasn’t Aboriginal because he didn’t look it. When the teacher broke up the fight the ‘friend’ told the teacher that the new guy had started it and that he was trying to sell him drugs.

*Small group focus – reflection sheet*

The mentees, assisted by the mentors, work through a worksheet that asks them to reflect on the video, asks what they think would happen next, what could/should have happened differently etc. The questions also ask them about their experiences of racism based on stereotypes of appearance and how they could handle this. (Field notes, 12 September 2014)

This presenter's personal story was told to introduce and complement a story told via course materials (in this case a short film). These stories worked together to deliver content regarding various possible responses to experiencing racism, which was then 'workshopped' via a comprehension and discussion activity. Whilst the telling of personal stories in and of itself allows for vulnerability to be shown, it was also made clear to the mentees that they were being entrusted with a story that should be respected.

*Whole class focus – presenter talk – PowerPoint of photographs and story on presenter's Identity.*

The presenter tells his life story using pictures in a PPT to show key moments in his life that informed his identity. He says '*I'm going to tell you my story, which not many people get to hear, but then I'm looking forward to hearing your story too*'. (Field notes, 9 May 2014, emphasis added)

The presenters' persistently develop relationships with the mentees, at the whole-class level, throughout the program by regularly telling stories from their lives. Demonstrating such humble connectivity by telling stories of self - as opposed to stories of others - is characteristic of Indigenous storytelling for educational purposes, especially by Elders (Goulet & McLeod 2002). In terms of how such culturally important personal storytelling may be used in classrooms, Martin (2000) has described the effectiveness of a Lakota (Sioux) teacher's demonstration of vulnerability through 'self-disclosure' as a feature of whole-class storytelling. Building on this, the current larger-scale study highlights that this technique can be deployed consistently and effectively, in 150 AIME classroom sessions, over five different states and territories.

Collectively, all types of presenters' personal storytelling was identified by mentees as important to their engagement with AIME:

... It's just hearing the stories makes me think. And like, it's really – it brings people together and stuff. (Jake, Year 11 male, Metropolitan NSW)

... the mentors and presenters are like – there to listen and their stories – their stories are so powerful. (Kenzie, Year 9 female, Metropolitan ACT).

In the above quotes Jake talks about his experience of stories shared at AIME and how they facilitated 'mak[ing] him think' (or engage with the curriculum content) and 'bring[ing] people together' (or facilitating a relationality amongst people). Because presenters' personal stories always doubled-up as content-stories, their stories may be conceptualised as functioning at an overlap between Wilson's (2008) 'relations with people' and 'relations with ideas'. The mentees simultaneously formed connections with the presenter as a person and the knowledge being taught. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, these findings support existing literature that position the use of storytelling (Baskerville, 2011; Martin, 2000) and relationship-centred (Baskerville, 2009; Bishop et al., 2012) pedagogies as inclusive of Indigenous learners.

Apart from 'putting themselves out there' with sharing their stories, presenters demonstrated their vulnerability to mentees in terms of modelling task requirements and 'having a go' at challenging learning tasks featured in the program. For example,

*Whole class focus - presenter talk – pre-performance task expectations.* In introducing the talent show performance, the presenter sets the expectation that everyone will perform. He pre-empts this by modelling: 'I'm not the best at this but I'm going to have a go'. He performed two one-verse hip-hop improvisations: a 'funny one' about his abs and a 'serious one' about how good AIME is. Everyone claps. (Field notes, 28 May 2014)

What is important in these demonstrations of presenter vulnerability and forging of humble connectivity via storytelling and task modelling is that they all took place as deliberate teaching acts within whole-class contexts (field notes, all). In this sense, the presenters' were vulnerable but still entirely professional. Moreover, the contexts of these moments of vulnerability were always appropriately content-driven.

### *Listening respectfully and valuing mentee contributions*

Another professional practice that mentees perceived as different between school teachers and AIME presenters was that AIME presenters listened to and valued their contributions to whole class discussions. Some of the AIME participants explained how teachers in school also listened but this act lacked the authenticity of the AIME experience:

Teachers listen but they don't really take in what the students say. But here they're like, I don't know, they're sincere. (Josie, Year 9 female, Regional NSW)

They [the presenters] just kind of always include you in what they're doing and they're always really friendly and they just take whatever you say on board and then they apply it to situations and they don't really say anything negative about your answers, they just support you on what you say and what you believe. (Mara, Year 11 female, Metropolitan Western Australia)

Without exception, the AIME presenters possessed excellent skills for facilitating safe and generative whole class discussions (field notes, all). There was always a verbal recognition of thanks or praise from the presenter for any mentee contribution; 'thanks for that', or 'that's awesome' were common refrains and presenters always linked mentee contributions back to core teaching messages to keep discussions and learning 'on track' (e.g. field notes 6, 9, 28 May, 18 June, 1, 2, 8, 9 August, 12 September, 22 October). Indeed, the ethnography showed AIME presenters prioritising listening to mentees and valuing their contributions over other plausible pedagogical considerations, such as 'managing' disruptive mentees. For example,

*Whole class focus – a few mentees share their speeches with the whole class.* The presenter stops everyone from their work and tells them he's 'stoked' at the speeches he's been reading and hearing about. He says that he has four names of people who have volunteered to read theirs out (he reads out the list of names). One mentee calls out 'Nah, five! I'll read mine out'. The presenter thanks him for his enthusiasm and reminds him that he hasn't finished writing his speech yet. To which the mentee replied – 'that's alright, I'll read what I got'. The presenter agreed but suggested that he could keep writing his speech while the others went first. Then without further discussion or invitation the 'fifth' mentee stands up (effectively both ignoring and

interrupting the presenter) and reads out his speech and finishes with ‘That’s all I got!’ then sits straight back down again. This was met with applause and laughter from everyone, including the presenter. Then each of the four remaining speakers was encouraged to stand up and read aloud their speech.

(Field notes, 27 August 2014)

Whilst the ‘fifth’ mentee in the example above acted in what might be considered as disruptive and subordinating manner in discourses that hold the teacher as authoritative ‘manager’, in this AIME session his contribution was still listened to and celebrated with applause. The presenter did not engage with the managerial position of the need to enforce discipline, instead he quickly acknowledged that this ‘disruption’ was actually also an outcome of the lesson (to feel confident enough to get up and speak in front of your peers). Presenters’ reflexive skills, such as these, based in good listening and an egalitarian, deep respect for mentee contributions abound in the fieldnotes. This gives credence to the mentees’ comparison between school and AIME: ‘I think at school with some things it’s yes or no but here it’s always yes, like everyone has their own voice’ (Mara, Year 11 female, Metropolitan Western Australia).

Trust was communicated to mentees via an intense listening to, and authentic valuing of, mentee participation in class discussions and activities. Curwen Doige (2003) offers an analysis of this in her discussion of what she terms ‘the missing link’ between Indigenous education and Western education. She argued a dire need for non-Indigenous teachers to emulate Indigenous educators’ and Elders’ promotion of authentic dialogue as a pedagogy for creating relational, safe, and *trusting* learning environments: ‘how one listens to dialogue determines the direction and outcome of the exchange of information’ (Curwen Doige 2003, 154). In the example provided above, the AIME presenters’ authentic listening and dialogic exchange transformed what could have been a disciplinary and ‘management’ outcome to an outcome of celebrating mentees’ learning.

### ***Trust via learning design***

AIME learning tasks confer trust on the mentee via clear expectations that they will succeed in the set tasks. For example, the mentees are asked to publish a letter to send to a famous Indigenous Australian using AIME letterhead (e.g. field notes, 28 May, 6 June, 28 July, 29 July, 8 August 2014). This may seem an inconsequential choice of learning paraphernalia but

reflect for a moment on who is normally allowed the use of a company's letterhead – a trusted employee. The mentees could have been asked to write their letter on blank, lined paper but they were not. This pedagogical choice to confer trust on mentees via learning design and resources is repeated consistently throughout the entire AIME program's scope and sequence. Other examples include, mentees being asked to add messages of kindness and hope to AIME business cards that they are encouraged to distribute in their schools and communities (e.g. Field notes 9 August 2014), they are given opportunities to design AIME corporate paraphernalia such as AIME hoodie designs and artwork for AIME apparel and website banners (e.g. Field notes, 12 September). In short, the mentees are trusted at every turn and in every major task to officially represent AIME. This trust in combination with the authenticity of the tasks convey to the mentees that the presenters trust their abilities to step up, rise to the challenge, complete the task and succeed as a result.

That the mentees were entrusted with representing AIME in major learning tasks was important. That this was communicated in part by learning paraphernalia (resources) demonstrates an overlap between Wilson's (2008) relations with people and ideas. AIME's learning paraphernalia (resources such as letterhead and business cards etc.) branded with AIME corporate symbols positioned mentees more as presenters' colleagues than students. Being trusted with the AIME brand communicates to mentees, albeit subtly, that the presenter is not 'making judgement of [the] worth or value' (Wilson 2008, 92) of their work product. In this case, trust-filled and egalitarian presenter-mentee relationships are fostered not directly through interpersonal relationships or dialogic exchange but through mentees' relationship with the ideas presented in AIME's curriculum and learning paraphernalia.

Presenters developing trust-filled relationships with mentees via learning design is also an apposite example of the known benefit of consistent application of high expectations to Indigenous students' learning. For example, Chris Sarra's work on the importance of educators having high expectations of Indigenous students is, arguably, a cornerstone of contemporary Indigenous Education in Australia (e.g., Sarra, 2011; Stronger Smarter Institute, 2015). This research reinforces Sarra's imperative that teachers believe their Indigenous students are entirely capable of achieving the set learning outcomes and in participating in the classroom in a competent and valuable way. Internationally, there have been similar findings. Findings from the Te Kotahitanga research and development project show the 'cognitive demand of teaching [tasks]' and teachers' high expectations as closely

related to positive teacher-student relationships (Bishop et al., 2012). Brayboy and Castango (2009) in their review of Indigenous education literature also point to the importance of high expectations.

### **Closing thoughts**

For National Science Week in Australia in 2015, the University of New England hosted a special event to discuss Indigenous Science with Aunty Frances Bodkin, a Bidjagal woman and of the D'harawal Nation. Aunty Frances' expertise in science, specifically botany, is widely respected and sought after, with many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people learning from this esteemed Knowledge Holder. The seeking of learning and listening with Aunty Frances is of great significance. Her work demonstrates how learning from Knowledge Holders is possible and how it is successfully occurring in other disciplines, such as science. Such learning is crucial for biepistemic practice in education. It is possible and we propose, is of immense importance to learn to listen to what Knowledge Holders may teach about pedagogy and Indigenous ways of knowing.

At the heart of this discussion is the AIME mentees' perception that pedagogies for building egalitarian, trust-filled teacher-student relationships are valued aspects of the AIME program. Our ethnography identified this trust as enacted in specific pedagogies such as presenting a professional persona that is friendly and occasionally vulnerable, listening to and valuing mentee contributions to class discussions and devising purposeful and high-status learning tasks. We have showed how these pedagogies for trust-filled relationships displaced more hierarchical and authoritative Western ideas and enactments of the teacher-student relationship. In this way, our findings build on existing calls from Indigenous Education literature (e.g., Bishop et al., 2012; Brayboy and Castango 2009; Goulet and McLeod 2002) to critique the ongoing colonising effect of long-term power imbalances in teacher-student relationships. We suggest there is scope for teachers and teacher educators to explore and promote egalitarian, trust-filled teacher-student relationships as a means of distancing unhelpful yet prolific conceptions of 'teachers as managers' professional dialogue and practice (McMahon 2013; Harwood & McMahon 2014; McMahon and Harwood, in press). To this end, we call for further research that investigates the capacity of biepistemic practice *to produce possibilities (and a new lexicon)* for more egalitarian and overtly *trusting* teacher-student relationships. We also strongly encourage teacher educators to take stock of AIME's

success and explore, with both rigour and urgency, the transferability of these relational pedagogies to non-AIME classroom settings.

## Notes

1. We use the term 'Indigenous' throughout this article as a broad representation of peoples who identify with the vast diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures within Australia.
2. Povinelli (2002) makes the cogent case that the spectre of 'tradition' or 'traditional' is entangled with the belief of "a truly positively alterior"; an alterity that "fixes the attention of the nation, law, and commerce, publican and politician" (p. 65). Mindful of this concern, we use the term 'knowledge tradition' as a respectful way to refer to the longstanding knowledges, past, present and future of Australian Indigenous people.
3. We use the term West here out of convention. Whilst peoples and cultures originally from Europe (the historical notion of West and Western Civilisation assume European origin) are not the only colonisers of Indigenous peoples and cultures, this is the case for Australia, the site of the study (and other First Nation people around the world, including Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Pasifikas and Northern America). Whilst the term 'West' is problematic, it has become an accepted as synonymous with 'colonisers' in this context.
4. We use the descriptor 'teacher-student' here, although we note that AIME does not use this 'schooling' nomenclature, and also that AIME presenters generally do not hold teaching qualifications. We use 'teacher-student' in this introductory section in order to describe a pedagogic relationship in the AIME context and connect the arguments of this article to relevant terms commonly used in schooling and existing educational literature. Later in this article we explain AIME's terminology for this pedagogic relationship, the 'presenter-mentee' relationship. In subsequent sections of the article we use AIME's terminology.
5. We use the phrase 'closing the gap' because this is the political rhetoric that AIME leverages to position its work (see [AIME's annual reports at www.aimementoring.com](http://www.aimementoring.com)). We are respectful of critique of the phrase regarding its deficit and colonizing capacities. We also wish to recognise that AIME's core value 'Indigenous = Success' works to contextualise any AIME-related 'gap' talk as non-deficit.
6. In this article 'pedagogy' is simply used to refer to 'methods of teaching'.

7. The funding body did not have any role in designing, conducting or reporting/publishing of this research project.
8. Two researchers [authors 1 and 2] conducted the data collection. These researchers are experienced ethnographers with two years prior experience conducting qualitative fieldwork with AIME.
9. Field notes are only identified by date as any further details such as location or program days would compromise the anonymity of the presenters. Throughout, field notes excerpts may comprise multiple paragraphs headed by text in italics. The new paragraph / italic heading in the field notes comply with setting theory requirements to delineate and sequentially record teaching 'episodes' observed (i.e., sequenced segments of instruction with unique tasks and programs of behaviour).

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## Tables and figures

*Table 1 – Number and type of research sites (university campuses) for ethnographic observations, with numbers of high school students interviewed at each site (N)*

	Focus sites		'Additional' sites				Totals			
	Met. <sup>a</sup>	(N)	Reg. <sup>b</sup>	(N)	Met.	(N)	Reg.	(N)	Sites	(N)
QLD	-	-	1	(13)	-	-	-	-	1	(13)
NSW	1	(8)	3	(29)	-	-	-	-	4	(37)
ACT	1	(4)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(4)
VIC	-	-	1	(12)	2	(18)	-	-	3	(30)
SA	1	(6)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(6)
WA	1	(35)	-	-	4	(18)	-	-	5	(53)
<i>Totals</i>	4	(54)	5	(57)	6	(34)	0	0	15	(143)

<sup>a</sup> Met. = Metropolitan campuses

<sup>b</sup> Reg. = Regional campuses