# Transcript

**Fostering Culturally Inclusive Schools:   
Pearl Subban**

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
Welcome to today's Thought Leadership Series webinar on Fostering Culturally Inclusive Schools with Pearl Subban. I am Mamoun Scally one of the expert teachers in residence with the Academy's Teaching Excellence Division. I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, the traditional owners of the lands from which I am joining you today. Sovereignty has never been ceded. I pay my respects to elders, past and present, and extend that respect to elders from the lands you may be joining from. I recognise the resistance of elders in ensuring that a deep connection to language, culture and country and the rich teaching and learning that has taken place in Victoria for time immemorial. Continue for First Peoples, both on and off country. In discussing how to foster culturally inclusive schools this afternoon, the educational inequalities that have been a feature of first people's lives since the start of colonisation must be front of mind. We must consider as the foundation of our work, building school environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children feel safe, included and celebrated, and are able to be who they are.

TARA QUENAULT:  
Thanks, Mamoun. My name is Tara Quenault and I'm also an expert teacher in residence here at the academy. Before we introduce Pearl and get started, a couple of things to note about how the webinar will run. As you can see, we're using WebEx webinar so you'll only see the presenters on screen. You can submit and vote for questions throughout the webinar via the Q&A tab. The session will be recorded and will be made available via the Academy website. At the conclusion of the webinar, a QR code will be displayed for you to provide feedback on today's webinar and what you'd like to see in the future. There are only three questions, so we encourage you to complete it and support our continuous improvement. It is now my great honour to welcome Associate Professor Pearl Subban. Pearl is an equity driven educator whose work champions inclusion, disrupts inequity and reimagine schools as spaces of belonging. Her research empowers educators and leaders to build culturally responsive, socially just learning environments where all students can thrive.

Welcome, Pearl. We're all looking forward to hearing your thoughts and insights throughout this discussion.

PEARL:  
Thank you so much, Tara. Privilege to be here.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
Hi, Pearl. I've got the pleasure of asking you the first question. Could you start by telling us a little bit about your journey into this work, and what has driven your passion for creating culturally safe spaces in education?

PEARL:  
For sure, for sure. And I also want to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been educators on this country for generations, long before our current systems of schooling. And I think that history reminds us of the responsibility we carry and how we teach today. Thank you for that question, Mamoun. My journey and passion for culturally safe spaces is both very personal and professional. It began long before I consciously chose a career in education. I grew up in apartheid South Africa, and we were placed within very rigid racial categories. If you know anything about the background of that country. And it determined where we could live, the schools that we attended, and even what we deemed would be possible for us in the future. So, these classifications, as you know, were not neutral. They shaped our everyday reality and then reminded me constantly of the racial power structures that sought to define and limit us. So, you know, those early experiences, I think, of being racially categorised and having one's racial identity named and constrained by the powers that be, including education, instilled in me a very deep awareness of how institutions can reproduce inequality and inequity.

So, I think that's where it all started. It sparked a lifelong interest in how education can perpetuate exclusion or inclusion, for that matter, or facilitate inclusion. And education can therefore serve as a very powerful site of transformation. So, that was many, many years ago. I mean, you know, I came to Australia as a young person, much younger than I am now and moved into teaching and later into academic research, now in at Monash. So, you know, I recognise that there are similar dynamics at play, although they are expressed a little bit differently at the moment. So, at the moment I see students from different race groups, students from different cultural backgrounds, those from immigrant backgrounds and other marginalised communities are often invisibilized in either the curriculum or in teaching practices. Their language is often excluded. Their histories are silenced, sometimes even undervalued. So, that's a challenge for me when I see that and what we'd like to do. And, you know, we talked about this before, I would prefer for these marginalised groups to not be viewed as lacking or less than or needing to catch up.

As someone said, you know, when I hear things like that, I think this is reinforcing my realisation that we are not in neutral spaces as educators or even learners for that matter. I think learning spaces and teaching spaces affirm identity. Schools are microcosms of society. Like they say, it's going to advance and enhance belonging. So, I think what we should be doing is giving students a voice, not silencing them and allowing them to feel completely themselves at school, if that's possible. Yeah, that was a long spiel about me. Thank you.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
Thanks so much. So, I was just sort of maybe drawing parallels as I was listening, maybe to your background in South Africa between the truth telling that happened there and what's happening with York at the moment. So, that would be an interesting conversation to have. Maybe another time, maybe it's part of this conversation. Thanks.

TARA QUENAULT:  
Thanks, pearl. Thanks, Mamoun. This leads us to a really interesting question about defining culture and why it's important. So, we might start there, if that's, OK. Because you've touched on a few reasons. It's important for students. And we'll get into the school context in a minute. But how would you define culture and why is it important?

PEARL:  
I think culture is such a broad term, but let's define it as a shared way of knowing a shared way of doing something, of being able to shape how we as people interpret and navigate our world. So, culture is a shared knowledge as well, you know, in that respect. So, it will encompass and encapsulate many things like our values and our beliefs and our traditions, but it could also extend to language the manner in which people communicate, even the gestures that we use humour, the roles we occupy in our immediate and extended families. And there's many, many unspoken rules, you know, so we could take them for granted. But I think in different cultural contexts these can become foregrounded or backgrounded, depending on what they are. So, that's how I would see culture.

TARA QUENAULT:  
I love that idea of the shared understanding. And there's also an element there of understanding that everybody brings in those visible and invisible elements of culture. So, when we think about it in terms of the school context, what does it mean in a school and how can recognising it change the way we teach and connect with students?

PEARL:  
As we mentioned before, I think culture is broad, but it's also dynamic. So, you know, it's a fixed set of practices to some degree that students actually carry with them into the classroom. So, you know, they are carrying with them traditions and customs and forms of knowing, as it were. And, you know, clearly these are going to change and they affect the manner in which students would interact, because these are social structures constantly reshaping. And I think for young people, especially young people who might have either grown up in another context or have parents who have come from a different cultural context as well, culture becomes a space of negotiation. Because you have first generation and second generation Australians. And culture becomes sometimes a very fraught space for them because they're having to find their belonging and their identity is challenging. So, they are influenced by family traditions at home, sometimes by their peers. And then, of course, we've got the media.

And then of course, there's the school environment and the expectations are so different there. So, I think us as educators, understanding this complexity is really critical. It's crucial if we want to move beyond stereotypes or, you know, these tokenistic approaches towards diversity. Just to extend that, to answer your question more fully I think in schools, acknowledging culture is absolutely vital. It's essential because teaching and learning are not culture free as we know. You know, everything connects to the culture that is visible or the dominant culture. So, every classroom and every school is going to have a culture. A classroom would have a set of unspoken and unspoken rules. And as a result, you've got this almost invisible set of norms in an invisible framework of expectations that reflects the dominant group. So, I think culture is going to reflect whose voices are heard in that space, the knowledge that becomes powerful and legitimised because students are going to be assimilating all of this and they're going to be taking it on, and imbibing that.

So, everyone learns very quickly in that space. It is a learning space. So, it's going to be imbibed very quickly. So, you know, they learn about themselves and their identities. And more importantly, I think they learn whether their identities, which are linked to their own culture at home, such as the language and heritage, family practice, whatever, whether it's being valued or whether it's being marginalised or silenced or ignored in that space. So, I think for schools, it's really important to become very intentional. I don't know, do you want me to go on a little bit about that, Tara.

TARA QUENAULT:  
I could honestly listen to this for ages, Pearl. What you've what you've said so far about the dynamic and changing nature of culture. I'm envisioning that even just within a classroom. So, not even necessarily the wider school context, but within the classroom itself. Could you speak a little bit to that and what teachers can do when they're when they're recognising the classroom culture and what students are bringing to it, to really affirm identity in the ways that you were describing.

PEARL:  
For sure, for sure. You know, I think educators, teachers, especially in primary and secondary schools, have to be very intentional in their engagement with culture because, like I said, if the classroom is a little microcosm of society, if we want to transform the society in which we live, then we probably need to transform that classroom as well. So, instruction, teaching practice becomes more meaningful because it's going to connect with that student's lived reality. So, let's say an example. Relationships could be strengthened if students young people are seen and respected for their full identity, not for only the parts that align with the dominant culture. So, often when a student has a different language that they speak at home, it's all about the way in which that's crafted and narrated so a teacher could validate the student's bilingualism as an asset, as something, as an advantage rather than a barrier, and say, oh, you know, that might impact on language development in English.

But just affirming that student's identity and affirming the fact that they've mastered another language at home. So, you know, we've done a lot of work with this. I know, but there's still quite a bit of work to cover as well. And I mentioned this in one of the other spaces that we spoke as well, I think embedding indigenous perspectives into our history and giving voice to that is signalling to students that knowledge in classrooms is plural in Australia, not singular. So, we don't have one dominant culture. We've got a plural when it comes to that knowledge sharing and that knowledge building, as it were. Those knowledges were always there, and and teaching and learning spaces need to recognise that and acknowledge that. So, I think when the teachers are looking at that space, they've got to recognise that the culture matters. You're affirming every student the minute they come in to say, you know, you're bringing your culture with you and therefore you are valued in this space and you bring a perspective into this.

And so you're a resource to help us to understand that. So, it is an inclusive learning environment. If that's what's happening.'If a student is feeling a bit uncomfortable about bringing that part of themselves into the classroom, they are probably not going to succeed. Because when you embrace the culture, you create a bridge for them. You know, to understand themselves and to find belonging, to engage more fully in the classroom, to embrace that equity which we talk about.

TARA QUENAULT:  
Thank you. It's really interesting to hear you talk about things that really come under our knowing our students and how they learn. It's a standard that we operate under. That's kind of the core of what we do in classrooms and how easily that can be deepened, I suppose, by delving more into the cultures of the people that we're working with and what they're bringing to the classroom and what we're creating together as well, which I think is quite a good segue into our next question. Mamoun.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
Yeah, I think we sort of wanted to cover the richness of diversity that we're lucky to have in Australia. And so I'm just gonna share some demographics of Victoria, just sort of set the scene and set the context of sort of the learning environments that are a reflection of society that we're were lucky enough to work in. So, Victorians come from more than 300 ancestries. They speak more than 290 languages and dialects, and they follow over 200 faiths. In 2021, 30% of Victoria's population was born overseas. Over 49% of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent born overseas. More than 41% of Victorians reported having both parents born overseas. And over 27% of Victorians speak a language other than English at home. So, what you've been talking about around sort of inviting those cultures, those languages into our learning spaces, but unfortunately, we also have data that shows that one fifth of students experienced at least one form of direct racism every day. And this is from 2024, so very recent data.

And so I guess the next question for us in sort of, if we're going to confront the less rich sort of data around the racism that's faced by our students. In your experience, how does racism and discrimination affect children's learning, well-being and sense of self? And I might let you answer that. And then we might come back to how to address that.

PEARL:  
Yes. Oh, look, it goes without saying. We know this, racism and discrimination in schools are deeply damaging, profoundly damaging for for children, for children and young people. At its very basic level, you know, it can erode an individual's confidence. You know, it would force a child, I would think, to question themselves, question their worth, question their intelligence, question their potential, you know, even a very subtle form of exclusion such as and I know we've talked about this many times as well, just mispronouncing a student's name repeatedly. Look, I work with many international students, and I often have to learn how to pronounce a student's name because you don't repeatedly want to exclude them through not saying their name correctly, or dismissing their cultural knowledge, or making a comment about their accent and what a rich, diverse population Victoria has Mamoun, you know, so we're so fortunate to be able to have that. But if there is even the slightest form of discrimination through a microaggression, it sends a message about who belongs and who does not.

And these everyday experiences of being othered of being of feeling different clearly is going to accumulate. And it's going to just weigh so heavily on the child's sense of self. I think racism disrupts learning, I said it earlier, it's going to generate stress and anxiety. Students will disengage from the classroom. They're not gonna feel safe to speak up in class. They might even withdraw from relationships with their peers. And won't take any form of risk in the class because of course you're going to be ridiculed. So, some children are going to internalise those stereotypes believing that they can't do much, you know, setting the bar very low, the expectation is very low. Others will probably just distance themselves from their cultural and racial identity in order to fit in. Because, you know, they kind of exchange heritage for common practice. And I think this is eroding themselves. It's eroding their sense of self. And it's going to carry lifelong consequences for them, for their well-being and their identity formation.

We can't even stress that enough. I mean, it's just the knowledge, we know that.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
I think that focus on the microaggressions is really important. So, the cumulative impact that that has and when we have 1 in 5 students experiencing some form of racism every day, like you said, it very much erodes. And so we want to move to a space where that's not occurring. And so on the flip side, when you've seen schools that intentionally and systematically embed culturally safe practices, what's the student experience? How is this student experience different in those settings?

PEARL:  
I'm glad we're focusing on the word intentional because that's important because nothing is incidental. Nothing is left to chance. It has to be intentional. And systematic is good as well, because we know we can transform our learning spaces if we do that, culturally and racially safe environments are not achieved through, you know, some form of symbolic gesture, you know, something that someone does. Incidentally, it has to be very, very deep and very consistent in order to respect and include and create equitable spaces. There has to be this consistent commitment to that. So, it's every day and some days are not going to be glamorous. Some days will be glamorous, but sometimes they're not going to be glamorous. And in those spaces, students are going to feel seen. They're going to feel valued and affirmed in their identities. And I'm pretty sure we are speaking here of schools which might have had some form of prejudice, you know, prevalent in this space. So, the journey is not going to be easy, but that consistent work is going to develop students who are more resilient, who are going to develop their self-worth, who are going to feel more confident.

They won't feel the need to conceal themselves in order to belong. They won't need to defend who they are in terms of their identity. So, it's an important element for us to do that. Of course, we do want students to encounter themselves in the curriculum. You know, we call that representation because the students language and the student's histories are then respected. And when teachers hold very high expectations of them alongside their cultural understanding, they're going to thrive. They're going to be more likely to participate, actively engage, persist in their learning, and they are going to know that they contribute to the culture of that classroom in much the same way that everybody else does. So, most important, I think, you know, we speak about a cultural group, but culturally safe practices are gonna benefit everyone, not just those from minority or minority backgrounds, immigrant backgrounds or marginalised groups,. Those kinds of practices are going to foster empathy and broaden perspectives.

Diversity is just normalised in that space. So, it's a learning environment that's rich and dynamic and equitable. You know, we might have people saying, oh, you know, that's an ideal, we aspire to that. We'll get there one day. But that's when we are kind of throwing in the towel. We've got to be more intentional, like you said, intentional so that we we lock in that cultural safety.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
No, I love that. For example, if we do embedded in the curriculum, I think it builds that respect with students, peers. And if the others, those who are not that student may be experiencing being unheard see their culture being represented in the learning, for example. I think it's all about building that respect across the board. And everyone sort of having a richer experience as a result. Thank you, Pearl.

TARA QUENAULT:  
Absolutely. And the acknowledgement and respect going hand in hand. There is a really interesting piece of the puzzle, the depth and consistency and making sure that it's embedded into practice every day. Shows shows that you are affirming the cultural diversity potentially in your classroom and the different cultures that people are bringing in. But we also have to acknowledge, especially in ourselves, that we have cultural blind spots. So, can you give us some examples of the kind of cultural blind spots a teacher who's grown up in Australia may have especially if they find themselves facing or teaching a class of children from a range of cultural backgrounds, but also in general, it really doesn't matter in this case about the range of backgrounds in your classroom. What are the cultural blind spots that we might have to acknowledge and face and think about when we're teaching our children?

PEARL:  
Yeah. Look, what a nice word. Blind spots. Yeah, we think about it when we think about driving. But I think all of us, all teachers, regardless of our background or experience, carry certain cultural assumptions shaped by our upbringing. So, I would think that many who have grown up in Australia, predominantly Anglo-Celtic norms there might be some invisible blind spots. And I don't think that let's not say they're not intentional acts of exclusion, but they they have powerful consequences in the classroom if those blind spots are left unexamined. So, you know, let's take one example, a common cultural blind spot, for example, is about how silence is interpreted in a classroom. So, within many Australian teaching contexts, silence is often assumed to signal confusion. Maybe even defiance a lack of engagement. And in other cultural traditions, silence carries a different meaning, so some students just remain quiet is a sign of respect of the teacher's authority. It just reflects, reflects a more careful listening maybe even thinking, because, they are processing an idea, which is, for them, a cultural preference.

But if you misinterpret that, teachers could underestimate that student's understanding or their participation, when in fact the student might be very highly engaged, and they are recognising silence as legitimising the teacher's authority in that space. And so I think, you know, that's an interesting way of giving credence to a form of communication from another culture. So, you know, it's creating space for that learning context that the individual comes from that background and showing respect, you know. So, I'm pretty sure many, many people who are, you know, within contemporary Australia are going to say, how do we know these things? How on earth do we find out what this is? And it brings us to that very interesting element of family engagement. You know, so it's a triangle, you know. So, you've got the student and the school and the family. So, we assume that certain things about the child's background, but we have to know that parents are going to be our richest resource in understanding cultural context.

You know, we've got to respect the background of the student. And so often many immigrant families have a deep respect for teachers as professionals. And sometimes they may even hesitate to question or even challenge a teacher because, you know, in the context from which they came, the teacher is to be revered. So, this difference is not a lack of interest, but it's a sign of trust. I trust you with my child. So, barriers such as limited English, for example, limited English proficiency or a lack of familiarity with the Australian school system is not preventing them from being involved. It's just that they don't want to infringe on the teacher's space in a way you know. So, they're not really wanting to be uninvolved, but involving them would probably draw on the strength of the cultural background that's at home and in so doing, assist the child to advance. Sometimes a blind spot even appears in the curriculum, though, you know, so many, many schools have... Or they embed multicultural education into the curriculum and pedagogy and, you know, it becomes this celebration of culture on a day.

But that diverse historical narrative is not really embedded within the school. And you know, the the kind of texts that we do like the work in the books that we read in other words, the visibility of culture has to be everywhere. It must be visible on this, of course, we like those days. I like those special occasions, but they must also be woven very meaningfully into the everyday life of the school, you know, into the fabric of the school. So, just think in terms of, you know, we're teaching a unit in English and or history or whatever, and we understand that there are certain dominant perspectives that come up when we discuss certain elements. Teachers could very intentionally reinforce exactly how that hierarchy of knowledge has been created, and validate the cultures that have been marginalised through those lessons. So, it's every day, it could be that one wonderful, you know, harmony day, multicultural day celebration. We love that, I like it too. But I think it also has to be more intentional than that.

TARA QUENAULT:  
Those celebrations are the glamour that you were talking about before, the glamorous parts and then the work of the everyday is the embedding of that into the classrooms. There was an interesting echo there, as you were talking about cultural blind spots with the idealism you talked about earlier in our session, where sometimes it's a paralysing factor. So, the idealistic, you know, that's very difficult to achieve. And so maybe day to day we don't make the effort sort of to get those small steps happening. There's an echo here with blind spots and checking those assumptions and then acting to bridge the gaps and to involve families and make sure those conversations happen really proactively which I appreciate there. Sorry, Mamoun I'm gonna throw it to you.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
Yeah, please. I was just reflecting on your previous answer. It probably starts the conversation for what we're looking at now around inviting students cultural identities into the classroom. And sort of touched on it's not sort of that one off occasion, but it's the ongoing that can occur. So, any specific sort of methods or activities that teachers can use to help children reflect on their own cultural identities? And we're talking even about children who are in the dominant group. And so for teachers, if they're looking at specific things they can do, what would you recommend?

PEARL:  
Yeah. Look, I think students from both dominant and minority cultures can benefit from reflecting on who they are and what shapes them. We all have a context. And we come from somewhere. And that's an important part of who we are. I think developing that awareness, it's like I started by telling you about myself, you know, it's going to foster a bit of confidence when they speak about themselves, it's going to gain some empathy. Also there's a bit of pride involved in that as well, you know. So, for lots of young people and children, school is the best place for them to celebrate who they are, to notice the differences and the similarities amongst their peers. So, I think giving them those opportunities to live their cultural identity and even explore their cultural identity helps to ensure that the process is affirming rather than marginalising. So, I noticed when we were on a school visit once that there was something called an identity map, which the teacher used with a cultural wheel, which I thought was really innovative, and students were charting aspects that influenced their identity family traditions, home languages, food and hobbies and values, and even faith practices as well.

And sometimes these visuals around the classroom, you know, it's revealing that identity is multi-layered, it's dynamic, it's changing. It's not something, you know, that's one label. And as a result, you're celebrating a number of elements as well. We spoke a little earlier about parents, and many students, of course, speak about their culture to their families. So, storytelling and narratives from your background, maybe even bringing an object from home to represent who you are, you know, a photograph from your home country, an object or a story from home for that matter. It will create an opportunity for students to learn about different backgrounds. Sometimes it's just the ignorance of we don't know why you do these things or why you behave in this way that creates that scary space for young people. And so these activities are going to build those connections, and it's gonna highlight every child carries a unique experience and perspective. So, you know, of course teachers are going to be central to that because they are going to facilitate the conversation that help students consider how those everyday practices at home are shaped by culture.

So, you know, something as ordinary as a meal time or, you know, a celebration like a wedding or something like that can look very different across families. And it's a nice way to normalise diversity. Like I said earlier, and help students to develop curiosity rather than judgement. You know, so you're not making a judgement, you're being curious. And we remain curious about people around us. I like the second part of your question, though, Mamoun because you said, what about those students who are part of the dominant culture? And I think it's equally important because often students from a dominant culture are often positioned as culture less, you know, where the culture is attributed to all the others who come from overseas. And so they feel I don't have a culture as a result. But that's not true. We know that. So, you know, reflecting on your own identity will help them as well to identify and recognise that they too are shaped by traditions and values and histories. And I think we often, you know, default to the dominant culture.

It becomes the default. And then this of course is going to foster a greater empathy and awareness. And so I think teachers are going to be integral in that again, because they are going to embed those inclusive practices in the daily routine of the classroom. Small, meaningful but intentional. And you know, a simple thing like, I saw this on YouTube the other day, starting the day with a greeting in a different language, for example, or even just acknowledging an important cultural festival that might be happening on a certain day of the year is encouraging that diverse perspective into a lesson or into a conversation, so that culture is not treated as just a simple kind of add on, but it's part of the everyday learning in that classroom. So, I think everyone's valued and everyone's celebrated. So, we will definitely get there, I'm sure.

MAMOUN SCALLY:  
That's great. As a languages teacher, when we look into our backgrounds, often it's the students of the dominant culture that who find it difficult to start with. We ask them, their background is I'm Australian, but they actually then have a superb experience in finding out what their background truly is, but also starts creating that two way conversation with families at home. And so you were talking before how to engage families, potentially of more recent immigrant background or not and to bring them into the learning. And so those conversations that those students have to find out with grandparents etc... who they are, where they've come from, what it means for them now. Really important. Thanks for sharing those examples.

TARA:  
Absolutely. Do you think there's possibly also ways in here through the curriculum? You mentioned earlier that the curriculum can often represent a dominant narrative as well. Are there ways to unpack the hidden curriculum, or whose voices might be missing? Have you seen anything like that? Or do you have any ideas about how teachers might approach that in their planning?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
I think it links nicely to the question you asked earlier, Tara, about the blind spots as well, because there's a link with that as well. I think the curriculum is so important when we think in terms of those silences. So, whose knowledge is being centred in the classroom when we teach? So, whose voices are missing? What assumptions am I making about who's participating, and what's the measurement of success? And so I think teachers, educators can create spaces for different practises, and that's more inclusive. It can acknowledge the fact that there are multiple ways of learning, multiple ways of being, in other words. So, we challenge what we think those blind spots, we are challenging those blind spots, in other words. So, practise can change quite considerably if we start thinking about ourselves as cultural beings within the classroom. And as a result, everyone has a culture. A culture is attributed to everyone. And students who have an identity are going to recognise their own identity in relation to other people as well. Yeah.

TARA:  
And something really interesting you said just there about recognising our cultural identity in the classroom as well, and the role of teachers in modelling that as part of the classroom environment, not as I'm doing this for you, the students. Othering as well. It's ours. Yeah. I might go to the next question, then, which is about navigating some of the difficulties that can arise around this. And I know some people in the Q&A chat have some questions about this too, which we might get to later. But my question is, if a student or another adult says something culturally insensitive or repeats a stereotype that they've heard, could even be one of those microaggressions that you've picked up, how can a teacher turn that into a constructive learning moment without shutting that person down?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Oh, this is going to be the thorn. When a student makes a culturally insensitive remark, it's important for the teacher to treat the moment as an opportunity for learning, not necessarily a disciplinary issue. So it's a teaching moment, in other words. So, children and young people are often repeating ideas or stereotypes they might have heard at home, or they might have seen in the media, or they hear it from their peers. And many of them don't understand the full impact of what's happening. So, I think the goal for educators in those moments, not necessarily to shame or to silence a student, but to expand the understanding and create space for dialogue, for something that's more respectful, in other words. So, let's say if someone made an insensitive remark, but we won't say what the insensitive remark was, the teacher could say something like we often hear about things like this in society. Let's think about where that idea came from and whether it reflects everyone's identity. So you're inviting a more curious approach to this very stereotyped comment that might have come up.

Or if someone says something, and they look genuinely, that's my view, in other words. That's what I think. To say, oh, look, I hear you, as we say, I hear you. Some people might believe that, but let's look at another perspective. How else could we see that? So, it's viewed more as a constructive discussion because sometimes shaming in that moment is probably going to create humiliation for the student and then a resistance to anything that was trying to be done through that. So, the teacher acknowledges the student's comment, doesn't endorse it, of course, but signals that a little bit of critical thinking is required when you think about that, you know. So, remember, the minute you ask a question, you're shifting the focus away from what the child actually said into probably, there's another way of looking at that. And so, the student doesn't become very defensive and starts to defend, back up what they're saying because their family believes it and that's the way it's supposed to be, but inviting another point of view.

Because remember, you definitely don't want them to start drilling down into what they said because that's the way adamantly I believe, and I'm not going to change that for anything. So, of course, equally important is ensuring that the student who may have been the target of that insensitive comment is supported in that space as well. So, again, the teacher has to step in, probably a little subtly through maybe eye contact or body language, perhaps even very explicitly name that a stereotype doesn't define that person's worth. So we're thinking about the student who probably needs some support, maybe either publicly or in private, and reassuring them that their dignity is being valued in that space. So, I think something like that over time could help build classroom culture, and like I said, I'm saying it verbally and someone who's listening would say, oh yeah, I've tried that, didn't work. It's consistency. Consistently responding in that way is going to build that classroom culture where that curiosity is eventually valued and respect is going to come hand in hand with that.

So, all of us misstep, which one of us doesn't, we're human beings. Missteps are part of growth, but we also need to understand that our words carry weight and as adults, of course, we tiptoe around words as we know, but children not so much, and they have to learn that language has to be used more thoughtfully. So, I think we have to prepare for the disagreement and occasionally correction, respectful correction without humiliating the student. Yeah.

TARA:  
Absolutely. We've had some good questions in the chat about that, about how can I, how can I prepare for this? How can I make sure that I'm making decisions that are inclusive and make them creating this safe environment? And what you've just said there about noticing and responding in the moment, not parking it or waiting or letting things wash or float past without directly addressing them is really powerful and can be awkward. I think that's a good acknowledgement. It can be really awkward. We won't always get that language right, but stating what the language should be and what the expectations are around respect is really powerful. (UNKNOWN) did you have any reflections on that?

SPEAKERS:  
There's just, there are some great questions coming through. So, I was hoping to take the opportunity now to start asking you some of those, Earl, and getting us, getting some responses for some keen audience members who are very curious about this space. Yeah. The one, I probably wanted to start with that broader one about what schools can do to change culture school-wide. But as a starting point, how to measure where that school might be and its cultural safety. So, have you got some suggestions as to how it might be able to measure how culturally safe a school is for students, but for staff and families as well when they're in that environment? PEARL SUBBAN: Yeah, for sure. Look, I think we've talked a little bit about the challenges that we face. Let's look ahead and think about some of the things we can do. You know, how do we set up structures, in other words, in order to create those culturally safe spaces? I think it goes beyond the surface. You know, so, but, and we need to intentionally move beyond the surface as well.

So we think about posters, cultural days, like we talked about earlier. But representation is really, really important, you know. So, if a school has a front page on their website, or I see lots of schools that have advertisements on buses these days as well, or open day advertisements and so on. It's important to represent the range of cultures at the school, you know. So, there are a number of cultures represented there. And the students who come from those different backgrounds should probably find their place there as well. Then there's a stronger sense of belonging there. But we can go beyond as well, include culturally represented ideas in the text that we choose in all the case studies that we talk about within our staff rooms as well. The perspectives from those range of backgrounds, those voices have to become part of everyday operation and everyday teaching, you know. So, I'm not a maths teacher, but because I've been using English, I'll just say, in a maths class, for example, you could use a word problem that comes from a different cultural context.

In literature, draw from indigenous authors, immigrant stories, any other global voice, you know. So, what teachers need to be asking is whose stories are missing here? Whose voices are being silenced? Whose knowledge is being privileged? And as a result, the minute you do that, you're going to change the way things are going to be done. So, we've got to be asking ourselves questions before we accept this is the dominant way of looking at things. So there are other voices, there are other stories, there are other knowledges, and we can't just privilege one. So that's probably, I would think, one of the first ways of doing it. Yeah.

TARA:  
Yeah, fantastic. So, there's the role of the teacher is so clear here in asking those questions and making sure that's part of the conversation as they plan. And we're also wondering how school leadership could support whole school curriculum mapping to ensure that these perspectives are fostered in student learning. Is there something that they can do on a broader sense school-wide that would support this so that teachers are supported but from that level as well?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
I think so. I think school leaders, I mean, look, we seem to have left quite a bit of the labour to the teacher in our conversation. But I think school leaders are also essential to build that agency and voice on the part of students who come from different cultural backgrounds. One of the first ways I think school leaders could help is to build the relationship with the family and the community. So, inviting parents in, and especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds, into meetings, allowing them to have a platform to share cultural practise background stories, maybe even expertise as well so that there is a shared feel for what's available in those communities as well. So also maybe even recognising that there are different communication norms because a family could come in and this format that we are using now is absolutely fine for us. But some families prefer face-to-face contact. Others might want something in a translated form, where there's an interpreter or translator at a meeting.

And I think school leaders making that platform available is really, really important. So, in policy documents avoiding those deficit framings like in the way in which a dominant culture takes over, but asking how families want to be involved and allowing them to actually have a voice in that space. Remember, if we address bias and stereotyping and what we said earlier, microaggressions, we are going to be shutting down quite a bit of those destructive elements that come across and impact on the way that we do our work as teachers. So building those moments when we can address those biases and reduce the amount of microaggressions, so model inclusive language in the staff room when there's a meeting. If something happens, so gently correcting a teacher. Yeah, I'm saying that very carefully as well. Gently correcting a teacher so instead of saying those students when they are referring to someone who doesn't speak the same language and rather say something like, oh what good fortune those students are of a multilingual background and English is only one of their languages.

And I think inviting that professional growth on the part of school leaders and then their teachers is going to change the way we see things. It's rewriting the narrative, basically. Yeah.

SPEAKERS:  
On engaging families, there's an important question that's come through around your recommendations for working with families from different cultural backgrounds where their children have a disability or additional learning need where maybe that engagement might be even as more important in some cases. So, often it can be a balance between meeting the needs of the student while respecting the family's beliefs. Have you got recommendations there?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Look, I think we've got two intersections happening there. So you've got the student coming from an immigrant background and maybe a different cultural background, different language background, and then there's disability. So, in that space, I would think inviting parents or caregivers in to share how cultural practise impacts on the student in a space that feels very safe for them and maybe even discussing how the care of their child in the classroom could be better facilitated based on culture so without any infringement, without any compromise to who they are. So, I think open and transparent discussion with the families are important. It may require an interpreter sometimes, and that's an important resource that families are probably going to be very grateful for because the school has gone to the trouble of doing this because they know that they want to be heard. And so the schools made arrangements for someone to come into that space and listen to them and then translate for the school leaders.

So, here's a moment when the school has a challenge, and they are going to address it in a very intentional means with a view to helping, with a view to changing the way in which their children are cared for. We're going into a different space there when you're thinking about disability because students with additional learning needs in classrooms have a profile that has to be accommodated just based on where we are as inclusive educators. So, I think being caring, being sensitive, being accommodating and accepting of the student is all part and parcel of that. But we've got the added layer of culture, and we've got to be very sensitive to the fact that the parent might have a very different plan for their child compared to the way that the school sees it. And I think having those open conversations, even though they might be challenging because it is going to be challenging, there's going to be lots of questions. Both teams are going to come in with different expectations. (COUGHS) excuse me, different assumptions.

So, yeah, I think it's going to have to create a different space, a different way of normalising inclusion, I think.

TARA:  
I want to pick up on that normalising inclusion idea if that's OK. Because we know that there are, we've heard students talk about this through various platforms that sometimes when it comes to cultural practises in classrooms, some students are expected to be the experts in their culture or the experts in their identity. And we're all, we're all under constant construction. And I'm reminded of the possum skin statements that arose from the Marrung strategy, where the students were saying that we don't have to be experts in our culture and identity, and we're here to learn and not to be interrogated. I'm wondering about your ideas of what teachers can do to lessen the burden of a cultural load on the students in their classrooms as they navigate this space and as they start to make their classrooms more inclusive.

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Yeah, it does become a challenge when an individual carries a cultural load. So and of course because teachers are being so wonderfully inclusive, and there is this need to draw on the others, it can become very easy to fall back on one student if that is the case. So I think there are different ways, intentional practise, again daily practises of inclusion that might not necessarily draw on the one. So, starting a lesson with very small routines, it just normalises, again, that cultural inclusion we were saying just now. It could actually be rotating a cultural spotlight the wheel that we talked about earlier so it's celebrating a milestone inclusively, not just birthdays and things like that, but any other national holiday or some cultural achievement. The classroom becomes a space that reflects the diversity, and it could include like a bilingual label or inclusive image or, yeah, spaces in classrooms where there are collaboration rather than creating the hierarchies that we know about.

So it's I think in every space there's going to be challenge. Yeah, I just think there's a way in which we can spread the work. There's a way in which we can become more inclusive in terms of maybe even displaying student work for that matter and celebrating their achievements in different ways and family traditions in different ways. But yeah, I think maybe rotating the cultural spotlight would be a nice way of shifting that because remember everyone is from a cultural background and there's no need to place burdens on one student or even one teacher for that matter. Yeah.

TARA:  
That's very true. And you've asked some beautiful open questions as part of your demonstrating what teachers can do. You know, whose voice is missing here is a really nice one because it's invitational rather than your voice is missing here. Thank you.

SPEAKERS:  
Thanks, Tara, and thanks Pearl. I've done a bit of reading around the trauma that racism can cause to students, and the questions come through around how we support students who maybe have disengaged or are unwilling to access support at school because of the damage by existing structures. And are there any resources that people can access to support them in that space?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Well, I think the Department of Education in Victoria has one of the first anti-racism policies that have been released to schools and here we are. And a question like that is probably sitting exactly where the anti-racism policy is starting. I think it's like we said earlier, racial discrimination as we know is profoundly damaging for students. It's going to erode everything about them. You know, you were saying earlier it's like someone at work once said it's you know, water on a rock, and eventually, it's going to go through because it's eroding. And I think the anti-racism policy is answering some of that because you've got a platform now that's going to allow students to actually talk about what's happened. So there's a zero tolerance for racism in schools. So, even a subtle form of racial exclusion is something that probably needs to be handled very sensitively because that whole experience about being othered can become a weight for a student, and it weathers their sense of self.

So we've got to be careful about how we manage conversations like this because it's just going to trigger stress and anxiety. Of course, it's going to impact on their academic achievement. So, I think the policy has created a safe space for students to speak. And if it's one in five, that's 25 or 20 percent, look at my math, 20 percent of them who might be withdrawing from school because of some form of discrimination based on race. It's going to impact on their learning. They're going to just internalise a great deal of it. So, I think the policy has become a bit of a safety net there. But I think schools as well need to become very intentional and look at the systems that are in place in order to assist students with first managing that because remember, it's going to be a huge hit to their self-esteem, and it's just not going to go away. They carry that for life. Studies are showing that there are long-term consequences to well-being and achievement, not just in an academic sense, social achievement as well, because they carry the weight of that internally.

Some of them are doing it quite unconsciously, subconsciously. But I think if a school is intentional again, good word again, it can transform the way that we're seeing racial discrimination. So, yeah, there is work to be done, but it's going to be very good work. It's going to be valued and affirmed and students are going to come away feeling stronger, and they'll be able to defend themselves and see what's happening. Yeah.

TARA:  
Absolutely. And a really good reference to the Preventing and Addressing Racism in Schools policy document that's available now. All schools, all government schools in Victoria, have to implement this from this term. So, it's a very current and topical policy. Lots of people have asked about school resources. So, I might just emphasise that that resource has guidance to support schools to action the approaches to a lot of these questions that we're asking today. And schools can also use their attitude to school survey data. There are three questions regarding students' experiences of racism. So, that's a good one for schools to dig into and review to get that measure, that gauge you were talking about earlier of how culturally safe the school is from the perspective of the students and what some needs might be. So, thank you for that.

PEARL SUBBAN:  
No worries.

TARA:  
(UNKNOWN), I might just throw to you, back to you again, what other questions have we got coming through?

SPEAKERS:  
Just one that wants to maybe dig a little deeper, more deeply into how we might go about it, either I'm assuming as an individual teacher or maybe as a school, how we might go about uncovering those blind spots, those things we're not aware of. And so, you mentioned documents, Tara, too, that might help with that, looking at data. But in that intentional idea of uncovering blind spots, how would we go about that?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Yeah, look, blind spots, as we said earlier it's quite significant. And I think a lot of blind spots exist because of a lack of knowledge of the students' background. And as a result, it creates a little bit of a lack of awareness, in other words. So, I think one of the elements that the anti-racism policy is also appealing to is the practise in the classroom and the curriculum. So we tend to become accepting of what's there already, and we don't look at an alternative way of knowing or another narrative or another historical background. And as a result, this becomes quite damaging to some students who are finding that there's almost this clash where the school culture is representing one element and their home culture is another. And that challenge is going to then impact on the way that they live out their lives. So we might need to become a bit more aware of other knowledges in the classroom. So, if we're teaching something, again, asking those questions, like you said, Tara, earlier as well, about which is the dominant perspective?

Has someone been marginalised? Is there a voice that's missing? And the minute we become aware of those omissions, the minute we become aware of the fact that there's a hierarchy of knowledge where some cultures are validated and others are sidelined, that's important. But I also think in terms of teaching as well, classroom management is another issue as well, because that can be influenced to some degree by cultural blind spots. And I think teachers, I'm sorry that we're giving teachers so much work in this space as well. But sometimes a teacher might be equating participation in the classroom, for example, as if a child speaks up in the classroom, it's considered to be that student is highly proficient. But I think lots of students who are from different cultural backgrounds might be valuing a different form of contribution where there's humility, or students from collectivist cultures might be thinking differently. They listen more than they contribute. Verbally assertive, verbally asserting yourself might not be the most appropriate way.

So, just being a little more curious, I would think about how students engage and how they demonstrate what they know is actually important. Sometimes a student who's quiet is just being overlooked or misjudged because of the way that they participate. But that's just because they are not fitting into that dominant expectation. But there's another way. There's another way.

SPEAKERS:  
What's your sense, Pearl? No, that's great.

TARA:  
No, it's beautiful. Yep. And you keep throwing to teachers, but I think the teachers want to do the work. We're seeing this so clearly from the rich questions that are coming through. So, yeah, please, please continue. What can we do?

SPEAKERS:  
I wanted to ask you, Pearl, what's your sense of the impact that maybe having more cultural diversity in school leadership might have in this space?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Oh, yes. I did bring that up at the principal's conference, and I don't know if I did it very well. But I think that representation is obviously very, very important because you can't be what you can't see, as they say. And I think students who are from minority cultures will benefit enormously if there is a reflection of who they are in the school leadership. Obviously, things are going to change, going to have to change. Three quarters of our teaching population is part of a dominant culture, maybe even more than that. But school is probably a good space to start because, like we said, there are little societies, micro societies. And so providing opportunities, I think, for people of different cultural backgrounds to represent a different cultural identity is going to be affirming that entire process that we are talking about today. You know, there will be reduced need for students to be disrespecting a culture if someone from that cultural group is in leadership. So, it's probably going to change the way that narrative happens because there's such a strong reflection of the school and the Department of Education's initiatives to embrace cultural diversity because we are going to see it in leadership.

That's going to affirm the process. So, marginalised communities become more represented in the space as a result. So, I'm pretty sure it's going to take a very long time to get there. I shouldn't say very long time. Consistent effort, intentional effort. We will get there.

TARA:  
Thank you. And I love this question that's just come in. What are the opportunities that we miss out on by not investing in this work? I think that's such a lovely thing to situate this discussion. What are we missing out on if we don't do this?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Oh, that's true. Yeah, that's a very positive question. You know, such a lovely strengths-based question because there's so much power in normalising diversity. You know, so we're going to create so many meaningful spaces and opportunities for our schools to be enriched and for our students to be learning about each other's backgrounds. Not in a reductive deficit sense, but we're building those classroom connections that are going to then translate into our world, you know. So, we avoid all that or if not, we're going to be reducing the discrimination and prejudicial practise that we see in the world today. Remember as well that the minute you have normalised diversity, you are opening spaces for conversations for students to be considering how culture shapes different people. And so it becomes ordinary to have those conversations. We should not be shutting down conversations because just because something is difficult to talk about doesn't mean we shouldn't be talking about it. So, have the discussion.

So talking about the differences are going to normalise that diversity. It's going to keep students curious about each other and importantly, it's going to reduce judgement, which is what we said earlier. Yeah.

SPEAKERS:  
Can I bring you back to that question around truth-telling and potentially examples from South Africa? Did truth-telling that happened at after apartheid have an impact on the education system? And what would truth-telling in our classrooms do you think mean for particularly First Nations children in Victoria and Australia?

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Yes, yes. That's such an important question. Truth-telling became very real in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I'm going to take you back to the late 1990s in South Africa. And truth became a four-part identity. I hope I can remember it all, but truth was divided into four, you know. So, the public truth, the manner in which everyone accepted truth, a very private truth, and then there was truth according to the artefact the manner in which evidence was provided, and then truth in terms of what was socially acceptable. So truth-telling, of course, is very uncomfortable for members of a dominant culture. And as a result, it can create challenges within society. So, when South Africa stopped to listen to people who had experienced intense and really life-changing discrimination in the past, it created this very reflective space where teachers, educational systems realised that a dominant expectation had changed the way that we were viewing learning and teaching.

It changed the way students were viewing their own lives. Everything was very deficient. Remember, we had been very damaged by a lot of the history that had happened in the country. We could not assert ourselves as individuals at all. And so, everything changed as a result. Look, South Africa is on a pathway. It's a journey, and it's a long journey still for them. They are, to me, a very young democracy, so it's its going to take a lot of time for them to stabilise as well. And I think, exactly like you said, Mahmoud, it's going to, it aligns very well with what's happening in Australia, with an older democracy, in this case, when it's compared to South Africa. So, it's an older democracy. But here, it's going to prompt those questions about what's happened in the past, and about the fact that we do need to confront that. And we do need to become humbled by the fact that there was a dominant culture that tended to erase and diminish another. That's an important conversation to have. That's truth telling because it's showing us that that's the level of engagement that we need to be undertaking in first.

And I know there's going to be resistance to that because there are multiple points of view when it comes to rediscovering and unearthing those truths. But it's that's what I said earlier, those conversations need to be had. We have to have those conversations in the Australian context as well, if we want to see serious change happening with our students, with our schools, with our society in general. So yeah, definitely have those conversations.

SPEAKERS:  
I wish we had more of those conversations today. But unfortunately, we're out of time. Thank you so much, Pearl. I'd like to take this opportunity on behalf of the Academy and all of our participants today to formally thank you. I think I speak for everyone when I say that this discussion was really thought-provoking. And for me, a reflection that I had lots of reflections, but during the conversation was how often curiosity and intentionality came up as integral to affirm and enrich our education spaces. It ensures we don't marginalise other perspectives. And what you said earlier that schools should advance and enhance belonging, depth and consistency is how we respect, include and create equitable spaces. So, that's what I'm taking away from our talk today. And I hope that all of you, like me, took something practical away with you as well.

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Excellent. Thank you.

SPEAKERS:  
I wanted to thank you so much as well, Pearl. What fantastic insights you've provided. I just know for myself, I could make connections to my school environment and really things, I could see the things that you were talking about, how potentially I could approach those things differently. So, thank you. Tara has kindly put up on the screen for our audience a QR code. So, if you could take a moment to scan the code to give us your feedback. Your input is really what shapes what we do at the Academy and what we do with the Thought Leadership Series. So, we value your time in engaging with that survey. And also, please keep a lookout for the last session of the Thought Leadership Series of 2025, which will take the form of a podcast with Dr Jodie Richardson on the theme of student wellbeing. In particular, it will focus on anxiety and how that impacts behaviour in the classroom. Thank you again, everyone. And then, we hope you have a great evening.

PEARL SUBBAN:  
Thank you.

TARA:  
Thank you, Pearl. SPEAKERS: Thanks, Pearl.