

The Gel in the Pell-Mell: Performing Arts Teachers as Agents of Cultural Integration in an Era of Mass Migration

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ABSTRACT. The world is experiencing mass migration on an unprecedented scale, and this migration is increasing. What are the implications for education and for the role of the teacher? This article extends Gert Biesta’s call for the re(dis)covery of the teacher: to consider how a teacher’s purpose may need to respond to the context of sudden and widespread acculturation. Through an argument that distinguishes *cultural challenges* from *social challenges*, this article proposes the significance of challenges to cultural integration and the relevance of performing arts education in addressing these. The concept of *teachers as agents of cultural integration* is introduced, with considerations of how tertiary institutes can integrate competencies in cultural relativity, political equity and creative facilitation within teacher-training curricula.

Keywords: migration; acculturation; arts education; cultural integration

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Teaching Identity

Looking forward, what competencies will teachers of performing arts require? How might tertiary education provide these competencies?

This article draws attention to the increasingly significant role of performing arts teachers as *agents of cultural integration*, and the pedagogic requirements and responsibilities of such a role. Through a somewhat radical re-imagining of not only the activities but also the purposes, relationships and knowledge of a performing arts teacher, this article extends Gert Biesta’s (2017; 2019) concerns about the disappearance of the teacher and the urgent need to re(dis)cover teaching

as an activity that has rationales that are distinct from specific learning outcomes. This challenge to the ‘learnification’ of education (Biesta, 2012, p. 36) is not a conservative plea for the revival of authoritarian teaching practices and greater social control: Biesta’s call for a renewal of teaching identity promotes the importance of the creative/critical agency of teachers, in ways that can also enhance the subjective agency of learners. By identifying and valuing a multiplicity of teaching purposes, we might advance discussions on teaching identity beyond the stale binaries of *The Sage on the Stage* and *The Guide on the Side* and consider diverse alternatives, including (what might be called) *The Gel in the Pell-Mell*: a catalyst of cultural pluralism within ever-diversifying societies.

As I argue below, re(dis)covering performing arts teachers as *agents of cultural integration* can enhance the intercultural aims of an educational system and grow cultural hybridity within wider society. Disentangling the goal of cultural integration from other teaching purposes requires that we also identify the skills and dispositions demanded of such a teaching identity. Before considering the urgency of acculturation and the meanings of cultural integration as an educational purpose; however, it is important to consider why performing arts education is particularly significant in this regard.

Teaching Performance

It is widely acknowledged that education in dance, drama and music does not solely exist to prepare individuals for a career on the stage (Fleming, Bresler, & O’Toole, 2014; Barton & Baguley, 2017). Performing arts education can provide learners with valued attributes such as creativity, criticality, collaboration and communication, supporting their future employment within a knowledge economy (Dean et al., 2010). Performing arts education has also been rationalised as an important means of engaging and motivating learners (Smithrim & Uptis, 2005), and of fostering a greater sense of connection *to* culture and belonging *within* a community (Kay, 2000).

This latter process of community construction through arts education is particularly important for a world that is in crisis and seeking transformation. Educational activities in the performing arts provide individuals and communities with a reflective space and a political mandate to creatively and critically interact with each other in a manner that also offers an aesthetic experience (Carter & Roucher, 2020). Through these sensually enlivening interactions, learners can re-imagine the world around them, conceptually offering questions and solutions in a way that might also be viscerally enjoyed as a fantasy. Through this ambiguous blending of a real world with an unreal world, artistic performance activities can reveal impending risks, alternate viewpoints and latent possibilities. Successive arts education policies have recognised this potential for arts education to provoke collective reflection and generate new conceptualisations of society. The 2011 UNESCO Seoul Agenda for Arts Education emphasised the need to ‘apply arts

education principles and practices to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world' (UNESCO, 2011 p.8). To understand the significance of this mandate for the teaching identities of performing arts teachers, it is important to distinguish these two types of challenges, *social* and *cultural*, and consider how arts education has been used to address these differing challenges.

The ways that arts education addresses *social* challenges is sometimes understood as a passive form of public pedagogy: social development/awareness campaigns that use the arts to educate a public in order to shift societal attitudes and behaviours related to health, education, democratic participation and other civic issues (Sandlin et al., 2011). Socially transformative arts education is also understood as a more active educational process, one that engages stakeholder groups in creative and critical learning activities addressing civic concerns such as peace, reconciliation, justice, equality and environmental responsibility (Chappell, 2010; Finley, 2011; Hanley et al., 2013; Kraehe et al., 2018). These socially transformative arts education processes have engaged the animation practices of dance, drama and music teachers within diverse performance frameworks that allow for collaborative participation, such as forum theatre (Baol, 1979), site-specific dance (MacBean, 2004) and community choirs (Bell, 2008). When effective, these teachers of performing arts transform a crowd into a community, activating the collective curiosity and social capital of a group of strangers through meaningful, collaborative and aesthetic experiences.

The way that arts education addresses *cultural* challenges can be very aligned with the animative processes of *social* transformation, but cultural challenges are nevertheless a separate phenomenon that requires further clarification. Firstly, determining what a specific 'cultural challenge' might be is a highly contentious issue. Previous UNESCO policies have sought to employ arts education as a mechanism to support the safeguarding and maintenance of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003), which emerged out of a concern for communities that were perceived as vulnerable to cultural hegemony and appropriation (Kurin, 2004; Blake, 2008). Politically conservative ethno-nationalist political movements have also sought to use arts education for cultural *revival*, arguing that the disappearance of former cultural practices is symptomatic of the loss of a more exclusive historic community associated with a particular place and history (Kew 1999; Kaminsky, 2012). Those that consider cultural challenges as problems that require *maintaining* or *reviving* particular cultural practices might generally engage an educational purpose that is very content-centred. The role of the teacher in such a context can be to ensure the effective transmission of an established canon of knowledge to students.

The challenge of cultural *integration* presents a significant contrast to the challenges of cultural maintenance and cultural revival in both political ideology and educational purpose. Politically, cultural integration seeks to achieve an inclusive and pluralist society through ongoing processes of cultural hybridisation (Bhabha, 1990). In terms of educational purpose, cultural integration encourages

learners to bring increasingly diverse cultural influences into a classroom, with the expectation that those cultural influences might form a basis of knowledge that is shared and expanded by all of those involved in education (Stent, 1973; Appleton, 1983).

Fostering such cultural integration amongst this culturally diverse group of learners can therefore require more than just an expanded curriculum: it can demand an expanded conceptualisation of teaching identity. A performing arts teacher's purpose when leading artistic interactions towards cultural integration is not simply a socialising enterprise. Cultural integration can require pedagogic skills and dispositions that extend beyond socially transformative pedagogies, and well beyond historic expectations of dance, drama and music teachers. As I argue below, for a society to be actively inclusive, it needs to value cultural pluralism and diversity. A performing arts teacher seeking to contribute to such a society continually needs, therefore, to critically and creatively reflect on how culture is being valued.

Teaching Acculturation

Why is this such an urgent matter? People are moving, faster than ever before, and not by choice. The United Nations estimates that, currently, more than 79 million people around the world have been forcibly displaced as a result of political, economic or environmental catastrophes, and every 2 seconds another person is removed from their home (UN, 2020). This means that in the average time it has taken a reader to reach this point in the article, approximately 170 individuals have been set upon the road. Of these, around 41%, or 70, will be under the age of 18; a statistic that might be more easily visualised as approximately three classrooms of high school students. By the time you reach the end of this article, that number will have grown to approximately eleven classrooms.

Most of these young people will remain internally displaced within their own national borders or continue into neighbouring non-OECD countries (such as Turkey & Columbia), which have received more than 80% of the world's international asylum seekers in the last ten years (UN, 2020). The forced migration of people has nevertheless become an increasingly global phenomenon, leading to the rapidly growing influx of asylum seekers into Europe and North America, and the polarising political movements that have accompanied it. From the building of the border wall between the US and Mexico (Pierce & Selee, 2017) to the abandonment of migrant boats in the Mediterranean Sea (Albahari, 2015), contemporary socio-political responses to this migration have directly challenged the humanist values and policies that were established following the atrocities of the Second World War (Edwards, 2005).

This mass migration also looks certain to rise much further. As a result of natural, economic and political disasters associated with climate change, the UN estimates that by the year 2050, there may be up to 1 billion climate refugees

globally, or one in every nine persons (Bierman & Boas, 2010). These people will be drawn from very diverse parts of the world (not just non-OECD countries) and, coupled with ongoing population growth, will present significant tensions on ever-shrinking natural resources (UN, 2020). Unless countries adopt even more odious policies of exclusion, through this migration, we might anticipate that our cities will continue to expand in both population density and cultural diversity (Wennersten & Robbins, 2017). In ten years' time, the cultural demographics of learners in our classrooms will appear significantly different than they did ten years ago. How might this present expectations and choices for education and for the role of the teacher?

To understand this, we need to consider the phenomenon of acculturation. Acculturation (the coming together of different cultural values and practices) is common throughout history: cultural groups have regularly migrated into new regions and encountered different cultural groups. The way different cultural groups have subsequently inhabited the same geographic space has been very diverse, a biopolitical process that inevitably relates to the distribution of power between and amongst the differing groups (Berry, 1997). Three common outcomes of acculturation are assimilation, separation and integration (Berry, 2005). They often blur with each other, so that these three outcomes might be considered as idealised points on an acculturation spectrum, rather than firmly distinct categories of cultural order. It can nevertheless be useful to unpack the significance of these idealised points, to consider the implications of assimilation, separation and integration on education and a teacher's sense of purpose.

To achieve assimilation, one cultural group is required to forsake their former cultural practices and adopt the cultural practices of another cultural group in order to share the same geographic location. This adaptation can occur casually, such as when members of a cultural group learn the language of another cultural group in order to gain access to institutions and marketplaces. Assimilation can also involve a more deliberate hegemonic process, in which governance bodies exert control over a culturally diversifying population. Formal education inevitably plays a significant part in this more deliberate assimilation process: a cross-cultural tool that can slowly conform a new generation into the cultural values and practices of a politically dominant group. Such teaching and learning may be part of a legally-enforced policy of assimilation, such as the *Stolen Generation* of indigenous Australia (Young, 2009), or through less overt means, such as forbidding Maori children from speaking te reo (Māori language) in school (Hohepa, 2015). While assimilation processes have been promoted in support of a nation's homogeneity (Tavan, 1997), this outcome of acculturation can disempower particular cultural groups and individuals, as they are required to forsake their own cultural capital and begin the processes of accruing the cultural capital of a dominant cultural group.

As an alternate method of addressing acculturation, separation involves the partitioning of social and cultural practices between different cultural/ethnic groups

who are inhabiting the same geographic space. Through separation, these cultural groups might preserve distinct cultural practices (including their formal education systems) while interacting with individuals from another cultural group in daily economic activities. This can involve a cultural ghettoisation that is not necessarily politically mandated but can nevertheless correlate with sharp economic and social inequities between the cultural groups (Massey & Denton, 1993; Christopher, 2001). Such inequality also extends to more politicised processes of segregation, with laws that maintain distinct civil rights for different groups based on race/ethnicity/religion, such as pre-1970s America (Massey & Denton, 1993), Nazi Germany (Whitman, 2017), Apartheid South Africa (Christopher, 2001) and Apartheid Israel (B'Tselem, 2021). While separation has been promoted as a means of avoiding the loss of cultural identity associated with assimilation, such segregationist approaches to acculturation have contributed to ongoing political conflicts around the world.

The acculturative outcomes of assimilation and separation have been extensively critiqued for contributing to social, political and economic inequities, for marginalising disempowered communities and individuals, and for sustaining sectarian violence. Both separation and assimilation have nevertheless continued as biopolitical outcomes throughout the last six centuries of European imperialism, national independence-building and globalised capitalism, as policy-makers overseeing culturally diverse domains of governance have wrestled with ideals of equality, democracy, homogenous identity and universal humanity.

For education, assimilation and separation have presented a particular, pragmatic and highly-politicised purpose to teachers: to ensure that learners (from either one's own or another culture) sustain the knowledge of a particular cultural system so that that culture might be continued on by the future generations of that geopolitical environment. The political goals of assimilation and separation further suggest that the particular 'cultural challenges' to be addressed by arts education are the problems associated with achieving cultural *maintenance* and *revival*. This mandate further suggests that an authoritarian pedagogy might be required to ensure that culture is maintained or revived, as students serve an objective purpose as the vessels of cultural knowledge. While authoritarian pedagogies have been challenged for debilitating a learner's agency (Biesta, 2012), the assimilative goal of authoritarian pedagogy has been particularly critiqued for devaluing the knowledge of disempowered cultural communities (Freire, 1970).

The ways in which acculturation is managed as a biopolitical phenomenon is in this way reliant upon the purposes, content and relationships of an arts education system. Attempts to transform a biopolitical mandate within acculturation therefore needs to be cognizant of the role a teacher plays within an arts education system. As the migration data presented above suggests, experiences of acculturation will only increase in the coming years, so aligning educational responses to emerging policy approaches to acculturation requires immediate attention.

Teaching Integration

The concept of cultural *integration* (the hybridised construction of increasingly complex and varied cultures) has been advanced within global governance policies as a democratic approach to acculturation (Gonda et al., 2021). Extending from theories of multiculturalism (Armstrong, 2020), the process of integrating diverse cultural ideals and practices is valued as a means of fostering more tolerant, pluralist societies in ways that challenge ethnocentric cultural hierarchies. Cultural integration does not require that all (formerly separate) cultural artefacts and processes need to be blended into a new, homogenous culture; the process of cultural integration simply seeks to liberate people involved in the process of acculturation from sentimental assumptions regarding the cultural superiority and the geopolitical entitlement of a culture. Through cultural integration, societies can question the legacies of European cultural imperialism and ultra-right imaginings of nationhood that seek to devalue and exclude cross-cultural influences and support the emergence of inclusive and diverse cultural practices that respond to the needs and interests of an ever-becoming society.

So how does cultural integration relate to arts education, and what are the ‘cultural challenges’ that need to be addressed by an integration mandate? It can feel comfortable to assume that cultural integration occurs naturally, as a result of human curiosity in moments of cultural exchange, and that we do not really need to do anything except *just let it happen*. Unfortunately, dominant social frameworks and institutions can maintain a power bias that explicitly or implicitly values one culture over another, impeding (or at least slowing) effective processes of cultural hybridity (Said, 1993; Bhabha, 1994). Formal education systems, therefore, have an important role to play in proactively fostering cultural integration. This involves more than just the placement of cultural products side-by-side: the tokenistic cultural fairs and performance evenings that are commonly used by schools to evidence a multicultural identity. The ‘cultural challenges’ for arts integration might involve this process of making marginalised cultures more visible. A more significant challenge emerges, however, when learners seek to engage in processes of hybridisation. For cultural integration to be activated within schools, learners need to feel encouraged to sensitively identify points of cultural synergy and contrast, and to feel empowered to make critical decisions about these cultural ideas in ways that lead to more complex manifestations of culture.

While the diversification of cultural concepts within formal curricula has opened these possibilities (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017), this diversification has also led to identity-dilemmas for teachers, who can feel that they do not have the authority, or possibly the inclination, to represent and promote such different cultural ideas. My own research into this area began with the stories of dance teachers in non-formal education in Palestine, and their experience of the hegemonic educational mandates of assimilation and separation (Rowe, 2008). This led to postgraduate research projects that I supervised, which sought to understand how dance teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand addressed diverse

cultural content in the curriculum. This first noted the sense of bewilderment that performing arts teachers can experience when called upon to lead learning into culturally unfamiliar territory (Ashley, 2012). It further revealed how mainstream performing arts teachers navigating cross-cultural components of the curriculum can tacitly assume an educational purpose of revival/maintenance when addressing these components, contributing to questions and doubts regarding the authority of their knowledge as teachers (Reihana-Morunga, 2020). This research has also revealed how the inclusion of indigenous cultural content can be hopelessly tokenistic (Mabingo, 2015), and the problems that emerge when the cultural learning is decontextualised to fit neoliberal paradigms of education (Hughes, 2017; Klein, 2018). These research projects also challenged Western frameworks of education for neglecting the vibrant and complex indigenous pedagogical approaches to creativity within dance learning, from Polynesia ('Ofamo'oni & Rowe, 2020; Hughes, 2018), Uganda (Mabingo, 2020), indigenous Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Reihana, 2018). Collectively, these studies question why the appropriation of dance cultures into the curriculum has involved transferring cultural artefacts as canonical knowledge. These researchers seek to challenge cultural appropriation processes that sustain a view that indigenous cultures are static and 'tied to inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new, but cannot produce it' (Clifford, 1989, p. 74). It could be argued that an unawareness of indigenous pedagogical approaches to creative adaptation has led to assumptions that maintenance/revival is the educational purpose for these cultural items. This 'salvage' understanding of indigenous cultural knowledge has also been sustained by an ambiguity about the political purpose of indigenous culture in the curriculum: as a means of achieving assimilation, separation or integration?

My research into the teacher's role in addressing cultural integration expanded with colleagues in Scandinavia, investigating teacher training courses for Physical Education teachers in Finland in 2016 (Anttila et al., 2018). As Europe was grappling with the largest refugee crisis that it had experienced in almost a century, the issue of acculturation, and the role of teachers within it, had become an urgent concern. The PE curriculum has expectations that learners socialise in very physically interactive ways, which can foreground very differing cultural expectations of physicality, particularly cultured understandings of gender. We identified that PE teachers were increasingly expected to navigate significant cultural differences in the classroom in very tangible ways that were perhaps not so apparent in less physical and experiential learning environments. These PE teachers had received very little preparation in how to effectively manage cross-cultural interactions, and their teacher-training processes generally led them to default practices of cultural assimilation: working out ways to convince migrant children from very diverse cultural backgrounds how to 'fit in' with local cultural norms. This assimilative approach to culturally diverse learners was also observed in a PhD study that I supervised of studio dance teachers in rural Aotearoa New Zealand (Mortimer, 2021). While we can acknowledge the pragmatics of such a

teaching approach, it is important to also consider the risks that education-as-assimilation poses to the learner's sense of belonging, the teacher's sense of teaching purpose, and the wider community's longer-term prospects of becoming a culturally integrated society.

Identifying the prevalence and limitations of assimilation/separation as educational purposes, and of a cultural maintenance/revival mindset within teaching, is an important first step. It can allow us to shift our understanding of 'what is a cultural challenge?' towards the challenges of cultural integration and to advance reflections on the teacher's purpose in addressing cultural integration.

Teachers as Agents of Cultural Integration

The role of a teacher as an agent of cultural integration is a relatively new idea and contrasts markedly with a more traditional educational purpose for a teacher: to assimilate learners into the dominant knowledge practices of a community. To be an agent of cultural integration, the teacher's fundamental role is to recognise and celebrate the diversity in the classroom and to encourage learners to experiment with this diversity for the purpose of constructing new, hybrid cultural forms. As an agent of integration, the content knowledge that a teacher might possess in a particular domain becomes a less important pedagogic asset. A pedagogic knowledge that enables the teacher to recognise ethnocentric assumptions and motivate equitable and collaborative cross-cultural relationships becomes a necessary competence.

In this sense, the role of a teacher as an agent of integration is more akin to that of a community amateur: someone whose pedagogy is focused not on advancing particular knowledge acquisition, but on using learning as a mechanism for generating ideas that are relevant to a particular community (Foth, 2006). This hyper-constructivist approach to pedagogy extends arguments that the role of a teacher is not to impart knowledge, but to stimulate a student's motivation to independently guide their own learning (Rancière, 1991). To be an effective agent of cultural integration, however, teachers require three further competencies: an *ethnographic disposition* that advances cultural relativity, a *political disposition* that disassembles culture-based power hierarchies, and a *creative disposition* that facilitates the emergence of new and valued cultural forms. Without these deliberate teaching contributions to the learning process, the educational process is at risk of remaining oblivious to the power dynamics of a cultural system and might unwittingly sustain processes of assimilation rather than integration. As outlined below, these three dispositions might be considered the gifts (Biesta, 2017) that a teacher gives to learners, providing the educational purpose of the learning environment.

The concept of cultural relativity, as a core tenet of contemporary ethnography, seeks to disassemble universalist, essentialist and evolutionary assumptions regarding culture (Malinowski, 1929). In doing so, cultural relativity argues against

three beliefs that are common to assimilative and separationist mindsets: that there are common cultural ideals/practices that are shared by everyone; that every culture has an 'authentic' essence that makes certain cultural products/processes more 'true' than other cultural products/processes; and that there is a standard pathway for cultural progress, placing some cultures as more advanced than others on this evolutionary path. Through the paradigm of cultural relativity, a teacher is enabled to recognise the injustice of such assumptions, to question why some cultural items are presented as inherently 'better' than others, and to value all cultural items in terms of their relevance to the current community and environment in which the cultural item is situated. Developing this cultural relativity requires continual reflection on subjective biases: a willingness to move from ethnocentric denials and defences against cultural differences, and towards more ethnorelative appreciations and valuing of cultural differences (Bennet, 1986).

To advance this cultural relativity amongst students, teachers also need to be disposed to proactively explore and address students' experiences of inequality within the classroom. Formal educational environments are inevitably hierarchical and increasingly focused on gaining personal advantage (Biesta, 2006), fostering an ever-competitive mood amongst learners. This sense of comparative value can be continually reinforced to cohorts of learners explicitly through grades and implicitly through gestures. As a result, students begin conversations on culture with each other from very inequitable starting points. Teachers can therefore be required to actively deconstruct any perceived hierarchies amongst learners so as to foster more promotive student relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). This can involve establishing symmetries of knowledge, status and actions amongst learners (Dillenbourg, 1999), an essential step for students to equitably collaborate on processes of cultural hybridisation (Rowe et al., 2020).

Finally, to activate such cultural hybridisation, teachers require a competence in facilitating shared, creative processes. This creative hybridization of culture can involve a process of what Latour describes as compositionism, which 'takes up the task of building a common world ... built from utterly heterogenous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, reversible and diverse composite material' (2010, p. 474). Such collectivised approaches to compositionism inevitably demands an explicit metacognition of collaboration (Frith, 2012), so learners are aware of how decision-making can remain shared during processes of cultural ideation. This allows cultural pluralism to remain central to the entire creative process: cultural diversity is celebrated within the conceptualisation, generation, composition and critical refinement of a new cultural product, and not just uncritically pasted onto existing cultural products. Without this capacity to guide cultural pluralism within innovation, teachers might provide students with an awareness of challenges associated with cultural integration, but not enable them to enact and produce hybridised responses.

These three competencies, while distinct perhaps from historic approaches to arts education, nevertheless emphasise why a performing arts classroom is an ideal

location to engage in processes of cultural integration. Dance, drama and music classrooms can require a high degree of experiential, sense-based interaction between learners: a structured and educationally purposeful forum in which learners can share and play with their existing cultural knowledge. These classes foreground ideals of culture and creativity, emphasising a learner's potency to make innovative artistic and aesthetic choices in ways that extend on the cultural choices made by others in current and previous generations. The performing arts are also (perhaps) less politically contentious zones of cultural content than other realms of education, such as history, sociology, health, language and literature. Teachers of performing arts might therefore be accorded greater flexibility to engage with cultural integration as an educational purpose. In a society that is rapidly acculturating, this presents more than an opportunity for performing arts teachers: it presents a responsibility.

Becoming the Gel in the Pell-mell

It might be assumed that the specific competencies outlined above for teachers as *agents of integration* are just tricks-of-the-trade: attributes that teachers might pick up when immersed within the sink-or-swim environment of a culturally complex cohort of learners. This assumption presents significant risks, however, particularly as governance policies have identified the urgency of cultural challenges, and the need for these challenges to be addressed by arts education. It might therefore be argued that higher education training programmes for dance, music and drama teachers carry that responsibility: to purposefully design tertiary curricula to develop these competencies.

To achieve this, further research is required to more deeply understand what cultural integration might mean within differing art forms and levels and contexts of arts education. Further investigations might also explore effective approaches to motivating current and prospective teachers in the performing arts towards such dispositions of cultural relativity, equality and creative facilitation. This inevitably requires an institutional willingness to adapt and develop curricula in alignment with the global prospect of an increasingly diverse and complex cultural world. Ultimately, this conceptualisation of performing arts teachers as agents of cultural integration is a call that supports the rediscovery of teaching as a distinct function within education. While it promotes particular responsibilities and identities for teachers, addressing the challenges of cultural integration can provide teachers with an agency to construct the learning content, relationships and purposes of their practice in ways that reach beyond the challenges of cultural assimilation or separation.

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