

Reading summary

Schulz, S. & Diplock, A., (2024) Negotiating the structural and personal intensities of gender, affects, and whiteness through culturally responsive becoming in mathematics, *Critical Studies in Education*

This paper examines culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in Australian mathematics education through the lens of a White female mathematics teacher named Lara. The study explores how race, gender, and class intersect in mathematics education within Australia's predominantly White educational system.

Australian education is marked by growing cultural diversity of the student body as well as major education policies that are grounded in whiteness (i.e., race relations which are uneven, yet normalised and often unquestioned by members of the racial majority). The Australian education system is both evolving with efforts to cater for a changing student population, while tethered to its colonial past. This carries a history of an education system that was historically designed for White students, with Aboriginal children only fully included in formal schooling in the 1960s. While there were efforts toward multicultural inclusion in the 1970s-80s, these were later overshadowed by neoliberal policies focusing on standardised testing and closing educational "gaps." These policies often frame Indigenous and culturally diverse students through a deficit lens.

Amidst these tensions, the authors of this paper are concerned with how schools and teachers become culturally responsive. They clarify that most Australian teachers are not only White but female, thus the White female teacher's relation to the culturally diverse learner is structural. Utilising life history methodology, the authors explore how one White female mathematics teacher, 'Lara' negotiates these tensions in a learning area synonymous with exclusion: i.e., classroom mathematics: a field traditionally dominated by White males.

Despite being academically gifted in mathematics, Lara faced gender-based challenges, including student resistance to accepting her authority as a senior mathematics specialist.

Her story demonstrates the complex position of White women in mathematics: privileged by race but disadvantaged by gender. Lara's teacher education program emphasised psychological and therapeutic approaches to education while neglecting critical perspectives on structural inequalities, racism, and cultural responsiveness. This left her initially unable to understand why certain students (primarily non-White) struggled in mathematics. However, through participation in a CRP action research project, Lara transformed her teaching approach. She used pedagogies such as: having students draw their conception of a mathematician, revealing ingrained stereotypes; using an "identity iceberg" to understand students' cultural backgrounds; making mathematics more collaborative and connected to students' life experiences; shifting away from traditional test-focused assessment; and incorporating students' linguistic repertoires into mathematical discussions.

These changes led to improved student engagement, better academic results, and positive affective responses to mathematics. Students began seeing mathematics as "fun" rather than anxiety-inducing, and classroom power dynamics shifted toward a more collaborative learning environment. The study concludes that CRP can help disrupt the traditional whiteness and masculine dominance of mathematics education. However, meaningful change requires broader systemic transformation. While classroom-level activism alone cannot solve structural inequalities, the paper suggests that micropolitical actions like Lara's can powerfully contribute to broader social change in mathematics education.

Take-home messages:

The need for an anti-racist pedagogy: Becoming a culturally responsive teacher in contemporary Australia involves disrupting ongoing racialised harms.

These harms are not only raced but gendered and so too is school mathematics.

Disrupting the exclusivity of mathematics has broader social implications: When we make school mathematics fairer, this has the power to change society.

CRP has the potential to disrupt whiteness and gender: The paper contributes to Australian scholarship on culturally responsive schooling by bringing whiteness and gender to the centre of theorising and discussion.