



INCLUSIVITY

# I can do this. We can do this. They can do this!

Confidently including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum and assessment,  
**Jennie Bickmore-Brand** and **Susan Starling**

**F**or many teachers, the challenges around implementing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum seems “just one more thing a teacher has to do” amidst the mounting demands such as new curriculum initiatives, addressing General Capabilities, differentiation, making thinking visible and more. Our concern is the impact of this attitude on the identity formation of young Australians. As educationalists, the authors in this paper ask the questions: “What might classrooms look like where Indigenous perspectives were not only affirmed but celebrated?”, “What citizens of tomorrow might teachers be forming by their own biases concerning our Indigenous history?” and “What is the role of pre-service teacher education in graduating culturally aware teachers?”

In the current school environment, it is easy for individual teachers, school leaders, and teacher educators to fly under the radar and keep doing what we have always done. Our research has been driven by the idea that it matters to too few people whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are missing from curriculum and, most tellingly, from student assessment (McCrindle 2016, Starling 2018). There is no question that transformation in schools and tertiary teacher institutions is necessary to address this gap (Bickmore-Brand 2017). Any sustainable change in teacher practice however, begins with each of us taking personal and professional responsibility to deeply understand our own biases and the beliefs driving or suppressing the desired change.

Given the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait





Islander perspectives as a Cross Curriculum Priority in the Australian Curriculum, and a requirement of qualified teachers in AITSL standards (1.4 and 2.4),<sup>1</sup> all Australian teachers ought to be able to say *I can do this!* School principals also ought to be able to say, *we can do this at our school* and teacher educators ought to be able to confidently say *they can do this* when graduating any Australian teacher into the profession.

Demonstrating cultural awareness and authentic knowledge of our history is not only the responsibility of every teacher, principal and teacher educator, but the right of Australian citizens to expect schooling in these matters. If teachers are to genuinely fulfil their professional responsibility to meet the AITSL Standards 1.4 and 2.4,<sup>2</sup> schools and universities must collectively address the considerable degree of hesitancy amongst teachers of doing anything, lest they make a mistake or cause offence.

The education we received, along with generations of teachers before us, lacked a true account of our first peoples' cultures, histories and languages. Our work with the current teaching profession, has begun to uncover both low levels of teacher knowledge; along with systemic ignorance, stemming from the silences or gaps in pre-service teacher education courses. Starling's (McCrindle 2016) research (commissioned by Australians Together) shows that Australian teachers did not lack the will to address these gaps, but were limited by ignorance which generated fear of making a mistake or causing harm. It is human nature to avoid what we do not understand.

The capacity for graduate teachers to confidently include authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in

curriculum is arguably influenced by the teacher preparation they receive. In the past decade, there have been more than 40 inquiries into different aspects of teacher education (Mills & Goos, 2017). Bickmore-Brand's (2017) extensive study draws from a Desktop Audit Report, commissioned by Australians Together, to investigate the inclusion of Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Standards 1.4 and 2.4 in pre-service teacher education. Bickmore-Brand's work mined the website of each of the 46 Higher Education Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers and analysed over 7000 units for content relating to the AITSL standards 1.4 and 2.4. While Bickmore-Brand's research highlighted best practice, it also revealed significant weaknesses. The study indicated pre-service teachers are graduating, year after year, with little opportunity to grasp the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to confidently and competently meet the required AITSL standards. This research supports the need to shift the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in Australian classrooms from being "a problem to solve" to an essential part of the formation of Australian citizens and identity, a goal of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEECDYA). When teacher preparation courses successfully increase teacher awareness of the authentic stories of Australia's history and cultures, it has the potential to enable them to better inform students to become more empathic adult voices and influence Australian culture.

One of Bickmore-Brand's most concerning findings was the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were viewed as *the other*. The research showed the topic was too often

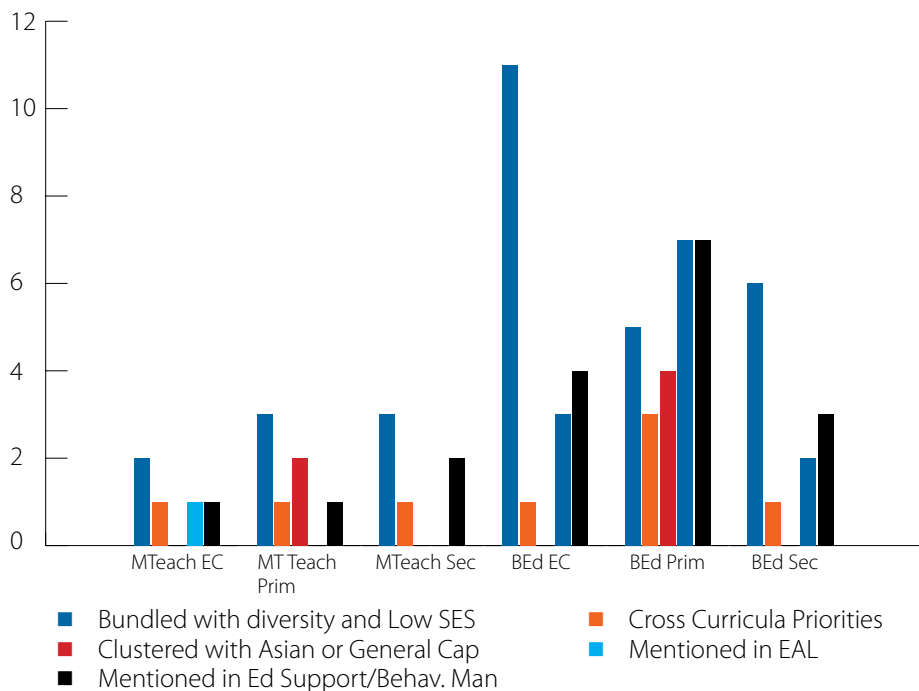


Figure 1: Non KLA (Key Learning Area) Inclusion of Indigenous Australian Content

bundled together with diversity and in some cases, with behaviour management, thus promoting a deficit narrative.

Positive cultural perspectives should be woven throughout all units and normalised, rather than being stand alone, or treated as somehow unusual or special. Bickmore-Brand also calls for a much stronger treatment in Science and the Arts. Charles Sturt University was one institution that demonstrated best practice, particularly through the work of Indigenous academic staff. Similarly, La Trobe University in Victoria ensure all staff and students study a module that provides more than mere superficial cultural awareness and knowledge.

The work of Australians Together<sup>3</sup> has effectively addressed a number of these challenges through the development of the Australians Together Learning Framework (Australians Together 2018). Importantly, Australians Together has also invested in rigorous academic research and field trials at individual schools, and in school systems, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of their materials and strategies (Gunther, In Press; Bickmore-Brand & Starling, 2018; Starling, 2018, McCrindle, 2016).

The Australians Together Learning Framework (Australians Together 2018) was developed to give easy access to teachers about knowledge many have

never heard before. It used an *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins and McTighe 2005) curriculum model, and links directly to the Australian Curriculum learning area content codes and elaborations that include an Aboriginal and Torres Strait perspective. While it is reported by teachers to be a useful tool, the research has demonstrated the most transformational element is the accompanying professional learning process which asks teachers to examine their own cultural identity. This self-awareness better enables teachers to hear and understand what actually occurred in Australia’s history from people directly and personally affected. Australians Together conducted several pilot studies to test the framework at Years 5, 6, 9 and 12 in SA, NT and Vic (Guenther (In Press), Starling 2018).

**Australians Together Learning Framework**

Transformation in Australian culture begins with the education system. It will be enhanced when each educator, responsible for curriculum, teaching and learning, from early years to tertiary teacher education, examines their own biases and is prepared to question their understanding and awareness of the true history of Australia; what went wrong, what it has to do with them, and what is an

appropriate response personally and professionally. When personal reflection takes place without guilt or fear, we might begin to see a normalisation of the study of our culture as a nation and appropriate awareness and celebration of our past, present and future.

**Recommendations**

The Australians Together organisation has enabled the garnering of existing research and current tertiary practice (Bickmore-Brand, 2017); and researched and trialled the practice of teachers (McCrindle (2016), Starling (2018), Guenther (In Press)). This paper has synthesised these findings into the following recommendations.






Schools and teacher education programs:

- 1 Examine individual and institutional bias – which are sometimes subtle and found in silences
- 2 Learn about Australian histories and cultures past and present, particularly the ongoing impact of colonisation
- 3 Provide assessment and learning experiences that equip pre-service teachers to genuinely engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rather than under the cluster of ‘diversity’
- 4 Make AITSL Standards 1.4 and 2.4 and ACARA cross-curriculum requirements explicit when planning, implementing and assessing – students should be expected to be able to demonstrate understanding
- 5 Develop or adopt a coherent overall framework and approach – the Australians Together Learning Framework may be useful here
- 6 Weave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives throughout each unit/program rather than being tacked on
- 7 Maximise the contribution from Indigenous people groups across the provider’s human resources and within all Key Learning Areas
- 8 Examine what the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children/learners might be bringing with them to the school from home e.g. language and ways of knowing.
- 9 Assist the pre-service and in-service teachers to develop strategies to engage with families and local communities



# Australians Together Learning Framework

## 5 KEY IDEAS TO INFORM TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ABOUT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PERSPECTIVES

	1	2	3	4	5
					
	<b>The Wound</b>	<b>Our History</b>	<b>Why Me?</b>	<b>Our Cultures</b>	<b>My Response</b>
	<b>GOAL: TEACHERS AND STUDENTS WILL:</b>				
<b>GOAL</b>	empathise with the reason why many Indigenous people experience injustice and disadvantage;	acknowledge how our shared past continues to have an impact on our present context;	appreciate the interconnectedness of Australians and take personal responsibility for attitudes and behaviours towards Indigenous people and culture;	value and respect Indigenous people through an understanding of the importance of culture;	actively respond in respectful and meaningful ways in both personal and professional lives;
<b>UNDERSTANDING</b>	understand that a lack of awareness and acts of injustice lead to pain and disadvantage; and	understand that history continues to have an impact in the present; and	understand that actions derive from worldview and attitudes; and	understand that knowledge of personal identity and culture will build empathy with others; and	understand that respectful relationships and connections reduce Indigenous injustice and disadvantage; and
<b>ESSENTIAL QUESTION</b>	will keep asking: <i>Why are many Indigenous Australians experiencing disadvantage and injustice?</i>	will keep asking: <i>How does our history continue to affect us today?</i>	will keep asking: <i>What does this have to do with me?</i>	will keep asking: <i>Why are culture and identity important?</i>	will keep asking: <i>How can I respond respectfully and meaningfully?</i>

10 Include education and awareness, raising professional learning for teachers, course designers and accreditors.

### Conclusion

Key ideas that emerged from the research and pilot studies indicates that sporadic commitment to building the pre-service teacher's understanding of our first peoples' languages, histories and cultures diminishes the likelihood of them meeting the AITSL standards 1.4 and 2.4. Our work found that when teachers have the opportunity to learn and understand curriculum content, they respond with humility as well as confidence. If each educator took personal and professional responsibility to raise their own awareness, study their own history and intentionally plan curriculum and assessment using tools such as the Australians Together Learning Framework we might find more teachers, principals and teacher educators able to say respectively *I can do this; We can do this; They can do this!*

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### Footnotes

1, 2 The Australian government requires of its graduating teachers the following two (2) of 37 AITSL standards (2011):  
3 Australians Together Learning Framework

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