

Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities

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I would like to acknowledge the First People of this Country and their contribution as the first custodians of the lands and water ways on which we now live, learn and work.

I pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge that these lands have always been lands of teaching and learning.

Throughout this article, I refer to Australia's First People as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as I would like to acknowledge that there are two distinct groups of people that are Indigenous to Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the First People of Australia. They are a key part of Australia's past, present, and future. The Knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – past and present – should be acknowledged and valued.

Abstract

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) identifies two focus areas that graduate teachers need to be familiar with to be competent to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and all other students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, history, and culture (AITSL, 2017). Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture into pedagogy and practice (Focus Area 1.4, para. 1) and engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities can be daunting for educators (Focus Area 2.4, para. 1). While on paper these appear to be two different elements, it is not possible to have one without the other. Being able to effectively embed content relies heavily on meaningful engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families,

and communities attached to a school and by developing and maintaining respectful, reciprocal relationships.

The following guidelines are based on experience when working closely with and assisting staff at Carlisle Adventist Christian College Early Learning Centre who were exploring ways to connect with Traditional Owners and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Each point identifies general ways that an educator can contextualise ideas and actions to their specific community when beginning to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the school curriculum or engage with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. These are simple steps with practical elements that can easily be explored and implemented.

Acknowledge and understand your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country and community

Aboriginal people are from mainland Australia; Torres Strait Islanders are from the 274 islands that make up the Torres Strait Region, north of Australia. Many Indigenous Australians have family ties and connections to both groups. Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group is different. They live on different Countries, they have different languages, their history is complex and there is diversity in their ceremonies, traditions, and culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives are bound up in Country. Country is 'the land'. It is the flora and fauna and the stories that connect people to place. It is integral to identity. Identity is influenced by language and culture. Identity is influenced by family and belonging to a kinship system – a complex family-like support system where each member has different roles, obligations, and responsibilities to one another. Belonging to a kinship system demonstrates that connection to culture, language, and Country (Quinn & Bobongie-Harris, 2021).

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Understanding your community context is about understanding the history of the land on which you live and the people who have come to live there. Policy has played an important part in determining where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are situated and how communities have evolved. Rather than make assumptions based on generalisations and stereotypes, it is the responsibility of educators to connect with Traditional Owners and understand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history in the community in which they live and work from their own perspective. Part of this will help you identify the correct terminology to use in your community. In the larger geographical sense, educators might hear the words: Murrie (QLD), Koori, (NSW), Nunga (SA) or Noongar (WA) (Quinn & Bobongie-Harris, 2021).



Figure 1. Uncle George (Traditional Owner Yuwibara Country) and Fiona Mann-Bobongie (Traditional Owner Darumbal Country)

Practice

It is important that you know and understand the difference between an Acknowledgement of Country and a Welcome to Country. A Welcome to Country is given by a Traditional Owner of the Country on which you work and live. Arranging a Welcome to Country can be overwhelming. Each community has their own

Traditional Owners that have a responsibility to give a Welcome to Country. Traditional Owners are not obligated to give a Welcome to Country, particularly if a relationship does not exist. Anyone can give an Acknowledgement of Country – teachers, parents, and students. This does not have to be formal. You are simply acknowledging that you are standing on the lands or Country of the Traditional Owners of where you live.

In 1995, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags were proclaimed official flags of Australia and fly beside the National flag. Something as simple and small as flying both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags is a big gesture. It is a visible way to show your support for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of your community.

For communication purposes, use a capital C when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Country (lands). For example: Darumbal Country, Yuwibara Country, Butchulla Country. These are all Proper Nouns. Hearing words and using words are two different things. Only use terminology that is recommended to you by your community.

Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP):

A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) is a framework for your organisation that supports the National Reconciliation Movement. A RAP supports and guides the development of strong respectful relationships and meaningful opportunities when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A RAP includes practical actions that drives an organisation's contribution to reconciliation in the communities where they operate (Reconciliation Australia, 2021).

Practice

Putting together a RAP requires honest reflection by the staff and the school on their current practices in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. A RAP also requires significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander input. How do you acknowledge and reconcile with a group of people without giving them a seat at the table? Consultation should be with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your community. This may include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, Traditional Owners and can also include representatives from other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups who live in the community, particularly if they have a long history with your school. Guidelines for a RAP can be found online at Reconciliation Australia (2021).

Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives:

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perspectives requires the creation of a third cultural space where these two knowledge systems can work side by side and the history and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is respectfully reflected in the school through community involvement and culturally sensitive practices (Nakarta 2007; Department of Education and Training, 2011). Educators should already be open to the fact that children learn and succeed differently and understand these differences within the specific context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who are expected to move between both Western and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge Systems, and experience success.

Literature and research suggest that embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges and perspectives encourages an openness to diverse perspectives, enhances **all** children and young people's educational experience and assists in the authentic advancement of Reconciliation. The following three ways of learning: *storytelling*, *yarning* and *deep listening* are interactive, and familiar to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students. These are a good way to begin the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and pedagogy.

Storytelling is integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life. It is part of daily interaction and imparts knowledge from one generation to the other (Bobongie, 2017). Stories are the sharing of lived experiences and a means of reciprocal educating and learning. Storytelling is an essential tool for

the survival and empowerment of Indigenous Knowledges, cultures, and identities (Hromek, 2019). *Yarning* is information sharing. It is unstructured in-depth conversations in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share stories and Knowledges. There are many complexities and layers to yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). When used in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, yarning is a culturally safe and impartial way of learning (Barlo et al., 2020). *Deep listening* is a big part of yarning that allows you to hear in a different way. It involves both verbal and non-verbal communication – listening to what is NOT said. It pays attention to the spaces, the gaps, and silences between parts of what is shared and said. Deep listening is taking a minute to breathe and connect, to build relationships and establish trust. To focus and concentrate on what is really trying to be said (Ungunmerr, 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members should be invited to share their understanding of storytelling, yarning and deep listening to model how these operate within their own context.

Practice

A yarning circle is a place where storytelling, yarning and deep listening takes place. A yarning circle can be a fixed space in the classroom or school, or it can be moved and set up in different places. It is important that this is a safe space where everyone is comfortable and can speak and be heard.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogical

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Figure 2. On-Country Professional Experience for Carlisle Adventist Christian College Early Learning Centre staff with Uncle George and Antwinette (Traditional Owners Yuwibara Country) and Fiona Mann-Bobongie (Traditional Owner Darumbal Country).

practices that educators can explore further include, but aren't limited to, Yunkaporta's (2009) 8 ways pedagogy, Uncle Ernie's holistic approach (Queensland Department of Education, 2016), and Both Ways or Two Ways Pedagogy (Purdie et al., 2011).

Develop and maintain reciprocal relationships between the school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Developing relationships within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities takes some time. Each community is different. They have different processes and protocols which need to be understood and respected. Educators have a responsibility to create culturally safe places for their children where they are encouraged to share their history and stories, working in intercultural ways through informed pedagogy and practice. It is the responsibility of the educator to understand complex kinship systems and cultural connections, engaging in reciprocal relationships between schools and community. Cultural responsiveness demonstrates a genuine commitment to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their perspectives in all facets of education.

Practice

Connect with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in your school. Ask them about the right processes and protocols when connecting with the community. Provide social occasions where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and staff can get together and share with each other and develop parent/teacher relationships. Where opportunities present themselves, employ qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, not as a tokenistic gesture, but because their knowledge and their relationships with Country and community are valued.

Where do you begin?

Communities and schools are all different. This article is a guide, a potential starting point based on one Early Learning Centre's experience. The engagement strategies listed are not the only ways to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into your school or engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities. Each strategy should not be treated as a standalone; educators are invited to explore the interconnectedness between them. Take some time to reflect on your own practice and see where some of these strategies might work for you.

This article was written on Yuwibara Country – Mackay, North Queensland. **TEACH**

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