

TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Prepared for the Dara Foundation

January 2024



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Ngarrngga honours the traditional custodians of country/place throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection of First Peoples to lands, waters, cultures and communities. We pay deep respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories and cultures, and to Elders past and present.



Ngarrngga
to know, to hear, to understand

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Design

Emily Gittins (Gumbaynggirr / Barkindji) is the in-house designer at Ngarrngga who enjoys the process of storytelling throughout all mediums of art, and likes connecting traditional storytelling methods with contemporary methods.

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Ngarrngga

Ngarrngga (pronounced “Naan-gah”) is a Taungurung word meaning to know, to hear, to understand and is a multifaceted, transdisciplinary program of works structured around three project nodes:

- Indigenous Knowledge in curriculum
- Indigenous Knowledge in schools, and
- Indigenous Knowledge in Initial Teacher Education

Informed by a design-based research methodology, Ngarrngga strives to support educators to be confident in showcasing Indigenous Knowledge within their teaching and learning to provide opportunity for all Australian students to learn about the contributions and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to Australian society through a practical and sustained approach.

Expanding on the work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curricula Project led by Professor Marcia Langton AO, Ngarrngga goes beyond the production of curricula resources by diving deep into the Australian Curriculum to draw out and illustrate how Indigenous Knowledge complements and deepens our understanding of the world and our relationships with one another.

Guided by the Program’s principles (figure 1), and informed by the values of respect, restorative processes and reconciliation, Ngarrngga centres Indigenous peoples, knowledge systems, histories and cultures alongside western pedagogies and practices.

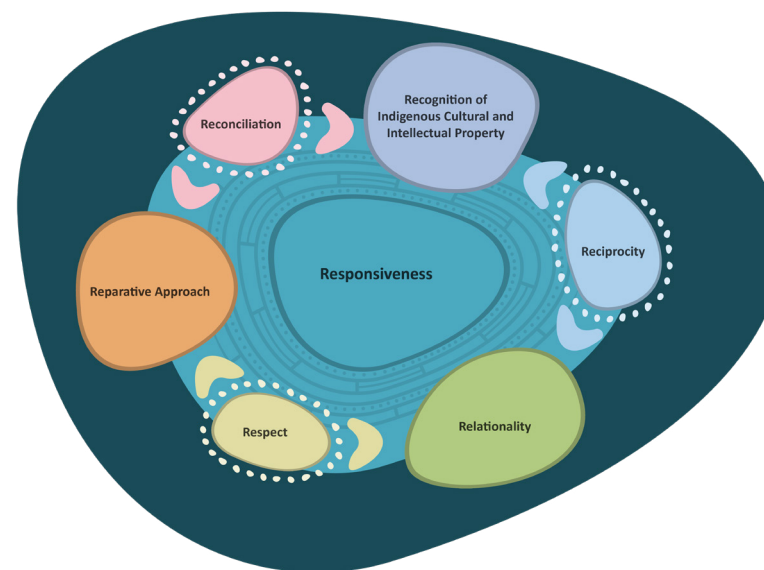


Figure 1 Ngarrngga principles

The current generation of young learners will become the next generation of leaders. Their values and intellect will be enriched by gaining a deep understanding of, and respect for, the world’s oldest continuous living culture. Educators are key to blazing the trail of this vital work.

The Research Team for this report included:

Professor Melitta Hogarth

Melitta is the Director of Ngarrngga and Professor of Indigenous Education at the Faculty of Education. Her research focuses on the translation of policy to practice, particularly in the area of Indigenous education. Integral to this research is investigating how to best support educators to engage with Indigenous knowledge and peoples to ensure the nation-building aspirations of curriculum and policy is possible.

Dr Michele Herrington

Michele is a Lead Research Fellow for Ngarrngga. She developed a linguistically informed spelling programme: 'A relational approach to teaching spelling' to provide teachers with not just what to teach, but how to teach spelling effectively and efficiently using a relational approach. This approach aims to knit together children's concepts about phonemes and morphemes in a way that reveals the structure of the English orthographic system and improves children's spelling performance and understanding.

Dr Jane Kirkby

Jane is the Senior Research Fellow for Ngarrngga. She is a passionate learner and teacher with experience across all levels of formal education. Her teacher's heart lies in the middle years where emerging adolescence adds a delightful layer of complexity to the interactions we have with our students. Her research focus includes investigating the nature of early professional learning for beginning teachers through induction and mentoring relationships.

Justin Wilkey

Justin is a Ngarrindjeri man and is currently a research assistant at Ngarrngga as well as a PhD candidate and sessional tutor in the Faculty of Education. Justin's research interests focus on the intersections of education, wellbeing and social justice for Indigenous peoples. His career in teaching and journalism has solidified his passion for enhancing the lives of young Indigenous peoples through the power education.

Suowa Zhang

Suowa Zhang is a Research Assistant for Ngarrngga and a doctoral candidate within the Faculty of Education. Her thesis explores the experiences of Chinese international student Returnees, particularly their gendered subjectivity negotiations. Her research interests are multicultural practices, gender, and transnational education mobility.




Introduction

The University of Melbourne initiated the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curricula Project* in 2017 to equip educators with the tools and knowledge to incorporate the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples effectively into their teaching practices.

The project sought to empower educators to create culturally inclusive learning environments by leveraging a number of freely available curriculum resources on the University of Melbourne website that integrate Indigenous Knowledge.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curricula Project* explored educators' levels of confidence and involvement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Resources, including those developed by the University of Melbourne. This research, with the support of the Dara Foundation, sought to understand the challenges and barriers to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources in Australian educators' teaching and learning practices. The research used an online survey, three focus groups and a professional learning workshop to explore the three key research questions:



What resources do educators access and use to support their teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum?

What impedes the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources at the school and classroom level?

What facilitates the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources in classrooms?

This report provides an overview of the research process and findings, concluding with recommendations for further investigation.

Background

The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) acknowledges that incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories into the curriculum is essential to closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Hogarth 2018). This is explicitly stated in the cross-curricula priority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. ACARA recommends an inclusive curriculum, allowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see themselves represented and enabling non-Indigenous students to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories using appropriate curricula resources in the classroom (ACARA, 2018). Research findings indicate that access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum content has been inconsistent, and the utilisation of such content across different Australian jurisdictions varies (Hogarth, 2018).

Survey Design

We conducted an online survey to gather feedback on educators' current utilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources throughout Australia. To ensure a structured and targeted approach, we created three specific research questions based on previous research.

1. What resources do educators access and use to support their teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum?
2. What impedes the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources at the school and classroom level?
3. What facilitates the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources in classrooms?

Before recruiting participants, the Human Research Ethics Committee approved the project at the University of Melbourne [2022-21494-33491-4]. The survey was conducted between June and September 2023, utilising Qualtrics software, a University of Melbourne approved platform to manage the survey process. The questionnaire was open to primary and secondary school educators with varied levels of teaching experience in Australia.

The survey consisted of twenty-one questions, of which eleven were profile-related, four were closed choice prompts followed by six open-ended options to allow for elaboration of each of the closed choice responses. Each research question was addressed by multiple survey items.

Survey Findings and Discussion

The survey was begun by 187 people. These respondents came from schools in the public school sector (56% of respondents), the independent sector (30% of respondents) and the Catholic sector (14% of respondents). Compared with the national school sector distribution rates, (ACARA, 2022), participants from independent schools were proportionately more numerous. About one third of participants (51 people or 27%) moved beyond the profile data having answered that they currently use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources in their teaching. This suggests that take up of the Australian cross-curriculum priority may still be limited. The discussion on Research question 1 provides some insights into why this situation may have arisen.

The majority of respondents had more than ten years of teaching experience with only four graduate educators (one to three years' experience) engaging with the second part of the survey. Response rates varied across the remainder of the survey. Despite these differences, the data provides valuable insights and serves to generate new lines of inquiry.

The key findings of the survey are:

- Educators expressed concern about the lack of available, reliable, high-quality, authentic resources.
- Educators often voiced their concerns about lacking the essential cultural knowledge required to identify confidently high-quality resources and effectively incorporate them into their teaching practice. Their perceived lack of cultural knowledge undermines their confidence and hampers their ability to select and respectfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources in a meaningful way within their classrooms.

Respondents identified four main areas of support that would greatly enhance their teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content.

1. More availability of *engaging* resources with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.
2. Guides to access authentic high-quality resources.
3. Support at the institutional or school level - time to work with resources and embed them in lessons.
4. Culturally sensitive training.

Data related to resource use are showcased here to highlight the tenuous nature of resource use that emerged through the survey. Findings are given for resource use according to year level taught and years of teaching experience. These findings inform recommendations for future research.

According to data gathered from 51 respondents, the utilisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources varies across different year levels. The data are summarised in Figure 2 and a breakdown of responses is given in Table 1. In this sample, a majority of primary school educators, ranging from kindergarten to year 5, expressed using 'many' and 'quite a few' resources in their teaching practices. However, there is a downward trend in resource usage from year 6 to year 8 educators, who indicated a preference for using 'some' resources. On the other hand, a consistent pattern emerges from year 9 through to year 12, with an increasing trend in the incorporation of at least some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources. These findings suggest a potential need for targeted support and resources to ensure a more consistent and inclusive integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content across all schooling year levels.

Table 1 Number of respondents using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources in their teaching by years of experience

		Many	Quite a few	Some	Not Many	None	Total
	Total	10	14	14	9	4	51
Years of experience	1-3 yr exp.	0	0	1	1	2	4
	3-5 yr exp.	1	1	2	2	0	6
	5-10 yr exp.	1	5	0	3	0	9
	Above 10 yr exp.	5	7	11	3	2	28
	Unspecified	3	1	0	0	0	4

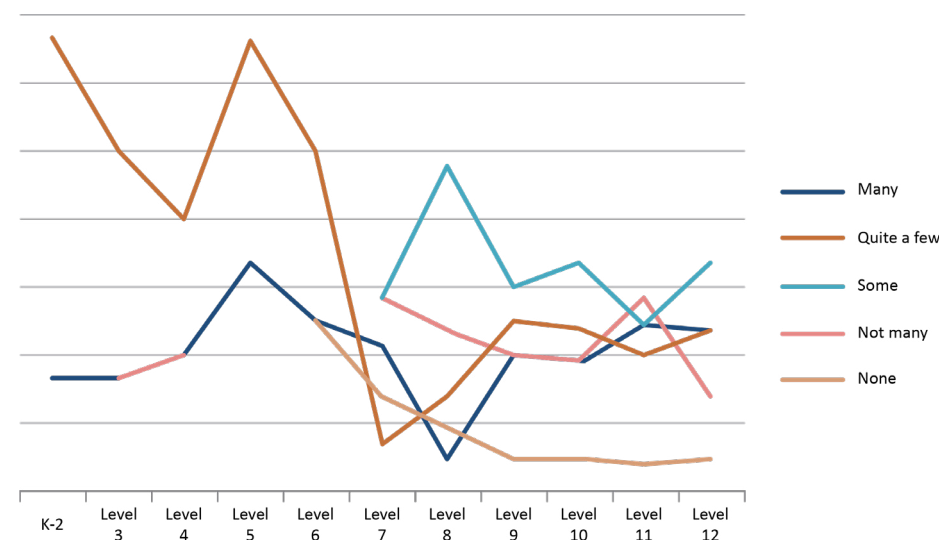


Figure 2 Graphic representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources at each year level

As this data shows, years of teaching experience appear to correlate with the likelihood of using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources to support teaching. Educators with 3-5 years of experience showed a higher tendency to use 'some' resources, while those with 5-10 years of experience reported using 'quite a few' resources. Educators with over 10 years of experience expressed a likelihood of using 'some' resources, whereas educators with only 1 to 3 years of experience (graduate educators) seemed less inclined to utilise these types of resources.

The following vignettes¹ gives examples of three participants' thoughts:

Riley has been teaching lower secondary Mathematics and Science for less than three years in a government school in Tasmania. They do not use any resources in their teaching and feel that there is no time to locate, create or plan for resource use. Riley feels unsupported by the school and notes that some input from more experienced colleagues to help navigate this aspect of the curriculum would help. They did not identify alternative possible avenues for materials or support.

¹ Pseudonyms have been used for survey respondents.

Morgan has been a secondary English educator in a Victorian government school between three and five years. They use some but not many resources in class but worry they will use the wrong ones. Morgan did not list any current resources in use. They note they have “no idea of where to start” and would like a clear springboard such as a website to steer searches. Morgan identified time as the biggest blocker and feels that more could be done.

Ash is an educator of more than ten years' experience. They currently teach Mathematics at an NSW Independent school. They have mixed feelings about the resources they use in the classroom. In the past, they have developed some of their own. Ash feels that many resources today may perpetuate misunderstandings and they would rather not address the Australian curriculum cross-curricula priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. Ash was scathing of the lack of a discrimination between cultural groups and considered much of what is on offer as trite and filled with silences.

These findings suggest that as educators gain experience in the field, they may become more knowledgeable about incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources into their teaching practices. However, strong concerns around quality of content is also evident for teachers at all career stages.

RQ.1 What resources do educators use to support their teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum material?

Our primary focus in addressing Research Question 1 (RQ1), was to uncover the resources utilised by educators to support their teaching of curriculum material. Approximately half of the 51 respondents provided specific examples of resources used. Resources mentioned included websites, television programs, TED Talks, films, documentaries, podcasts, books, curriculum materials, and social media platforms. The Australians Together website was the most often cited followed by Wingaru Education and AIATSIS.

A number of respondents teaching English, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Arts, Health and PE, and 'other' subjects reported using 'quite a few', or 'some' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources to support their teaching. However, most of the Mathematics educators in this sample indicated using 'Not many' or 'None' of these resources. This finding highlights a potential discrepancy in the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources among different subject areas, with Mathematics educators being less likely to incorporate such resources into their teaching practices.

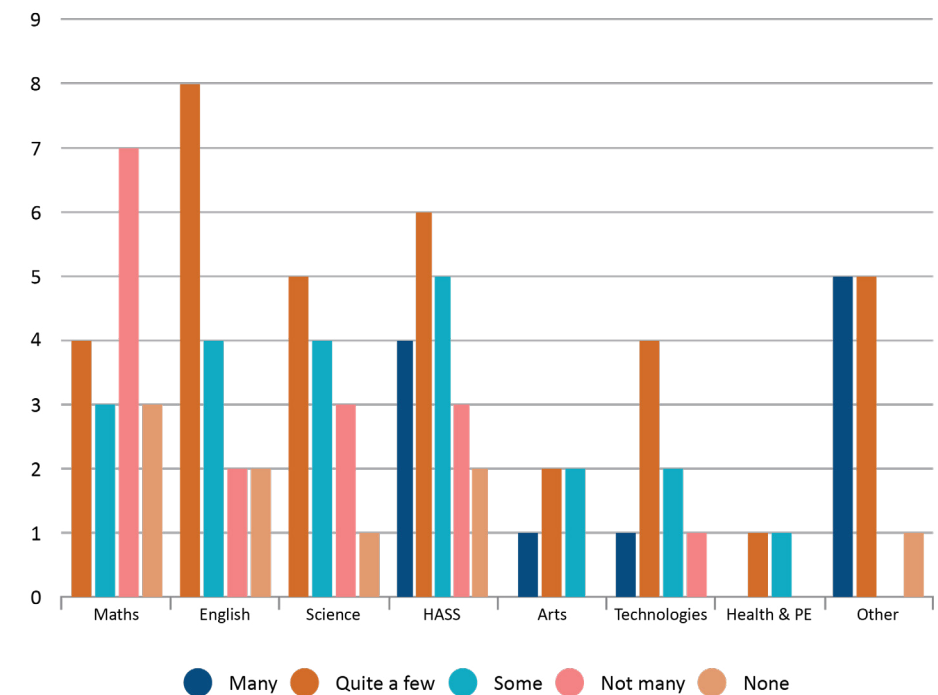


Figure 3 Graphic representation of the intersection between the use of resources and school subject areas across the survey sample

RQ.2 What impedes the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources at the school and classroom levels?

Thematic analysis was completed on two open-ended items related to reasons educators did not teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander materials and the perceived organisational/ institutional reasons associated with this inaction. The three main impediments at a school level identified were 1) issues of time and 2) budget constraints and 3) school administrative and collegial support for engaging with this material.

At the personal level, educators were concerned about teaching incorrect or sensitive material and identified their lack of cultural knowledge. Unlearning outdated information and acquiring accurate knowledge becomes a crucial step in the process. Educators strive to be well-researched, but when they encounter differing opinions, they may worry about unintentionally perpetuating inaccuracies or causing offence.

A secondary English educator expressed the concern that arose across multiple responses:

Am I being respectful?
Am I teaching it right?
Not enough resources- print,
digital or persons.
[Secondary English educator, more
than 10 years of experience, QLD
independent secondary school]

RQ.3 What support do educators identify to improve their teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content?

In answering Research Question 3 (RQ3), we draw on the responses that identified the areas of support that would enhance the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. Firstly, respondents expressed the need for more engaging resources that include the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Secondly, respondents highlighted the importance of having guides, training or tools to access authentic, high-quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources. It was proposed these guides could assist educators in selecting appropriate materials that accurately represent the cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Additionally, educators made valuable suggestions about the kinds of support needed to access and use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources. These included access to prepared lessons, exemplars of practice and connections to community representatives. This comment from an NSW Mathematics educator encapsulates the needs identified by the other respondents:

[We need] genuine resources on mathematics in Indigenous cultures, kinship systems, song lines, stories in mathematics and the whole world of things I don't know that are designed to help me learn... rather than make me feel like I'm incorporating indigenous culture by running statistics on Indigenous communities like they were an alien species.

[Secondary Mathematics educator, 5-10 years of experience, NSW state secondary school]

Focus Group Design

Three focus groups were conducted online using Zoom, with nine participants in total. The participants were all experienced educators across Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary levels. Several participants held positions at the middle level leadership within their school. While only nine participants took part, there was representation across Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia and Northern Territory. Strong discussions evolved in all three sessions. Participants engaged in a recorded hour-long session with two University of Melbourne facilitators and shared responses to four key questions. These questions align with the intent of those in the survey.

1. Why is embedding Indigenous knowledges, histories and cultures in education important?
2. In what ways are you observing or embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures currently?
3. What are the challenges and barriers experienced when embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures in teaching and learning?
4. How can educators be better supported to embed Indigenous knowledges, histories and cultures into their teaching and learning?

In addition, a school-based professional learning session was conducted face to face by University of Melbourne academics. The nineteen participants worked in small groups and addressed the above questions. Each group recorded their responses in writing during the session and these were collected and analysed with Focus Group data. In total, twenty-eight educators participated in this stage of the research.

Focus Group Findings and Discussion

The strongest message that came from the participants was their desire to be part of a move towards Reconciliation. Truth-telling was raised and explored by participants across the three Focus Group discussions. One Victorian secondary educator spoke of the need to present 'the good, the bad and the ugly' in an effort to ensure a 'completeness of Australian history is taught'. This sentiment was evident across all of the groups.

Participants indicated the need to increase the visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in schools for the benefit of all students. They spoke of visibility of culture and the validation this has for Indigenous students. As one primary educator said:

...everyone wants to see themselves represented, to have their strengths, their knowledges and things like that valued.

They went on to note the benefits for all students to be exposed to a different knowledge system and have their learning enriched. Another primary school participant expressed, to murmurs of agreement by others present.

...if we can change the language and perspectives of our children... to be able to celebrate what [First Nations'] culture[s] offer ... a clearer perspective from [First Nations] people's viewpoints ... hopefully [this] has impact in the community.



Figure 4 Visual representation of focus group discussion, 2023. Artwork: Devon Bunce, Pigeon Nest.

Time was raised a key barrier for educators when sourcing classroom materials. One layer of complexity came from making connections with local communities to ensure that the content could be localised as directed by the Australian Curriculum v9. Most participants identified that local community members were seen as highly valuable sources of guidance. Time was needed to identify relevant people and build, and sometimes repair, relationships. Some anecdotes of experiences were shared that reflected the positive impact these in-person community-based experiences had on both staff and students. However, there was acknowledgement that the demand on these community members meant that other avenues needed to be found. As a result, knowing how to locate and evaluate materials was another activity that required significant time for teachers. One participant summed up the discussion by saying:

...time and time again, [searching] comes up with all Aboriginal people are the same, and Torres Strait Islanders often don't get a look-in... there's a lot of nuances that are little complications to do things well and effectively without causing offence.

One of the challenges raised by several participants was the tendency to 'tack' Indigenous knowledges on to other subjects, almost as an afterthought. In discussing what might support educators, a West Australian secondary educator noted that First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing are largely holistic and the individual school subject approach makes it difficult to embed meaningfully. They said:

...we need to have a more collaborative approach... that's how deeper learning and embedment will come... First Nations knowledge always has to be meaningful and purposeful; it doesn't stand on its own.

Collaboration between communities and schools, cross-subject collaboration, and engagement between universities and schools were all suggested during focus group sessions as mechanisms to better support educators.

Suggestions for Future Research

Evaluation of the data collected across this project revealed several areas for further investigation. These represent educator professional learning and conditions for practice, and resource quality and accessibility.

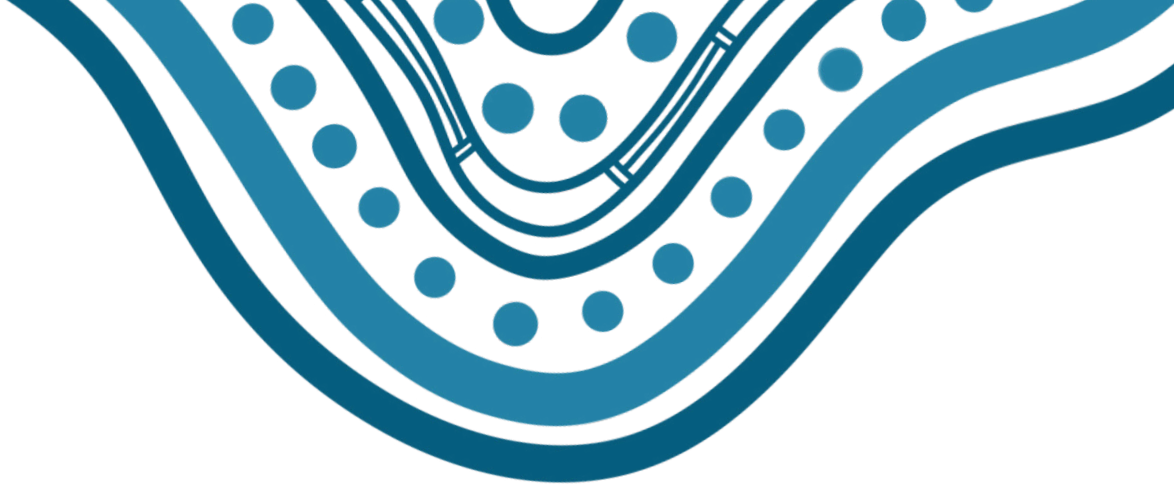
1. In comparison to the resources available, educators in this survey identified limited numbers of resources in classroom use, particularly in the middle years of schooling. This is a concern and further analysis could explore the reasons behind this. Insights could be collected into ways to support those teaching in the middle years
2. Survey data showed that resource use seemed to be linked to years of experience. Further investigation could uncover how to encourage the use of such resources among educators with fewer years of experience. Graduate educators were under-represented in the survey and the focus groups, so their experiences remain unknown. The shift to full teacher registration requires meeting AITSL standards 1.4² and 2.4³ specifically. Research shows that the transition to the profession is fraught with tensions about identity and practice. How graduate educators experience meeting these standards would be valuable data in order to plan effective professional learning and resources readily used.
3. Educators were concerned about the quality and integrity of resources. Work in this area could include trialling an evaluation tool and tracking how this might impact educators' practice.

Concluding Comments

This research project aims to foster the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources into the teaching and learning practices of Australian classroom educators and educational stakeholders. It is evident that although a wide range of such curriculum materials exists, there are concerns about the quality, relevance, and outdated nature of some of these resources, resulting in their variable usability (White et al., 2013). Our findings from the survey and focus groups suggest that White's comment is still relevant today. Time to locate, develop and implement materials created a major challenge for educators. Collaboration between communities, institutions and colleagues may be a supporting factor, particularly when building early career educator capacity. While this data capture the voices of educators who are confident to share their experiences, a large number of survey participants fell to the wayside and focus group participation was low. It is important to keep exploring how educators are working in this curriculum space and continue to uncover ways in which their work may be enhanced.

² Focus Area 1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. On successful completion of their initial teacher education, Graduate teachers are required to "Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds". See AITSL standards.

³ Focus Area 2.4: Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. On successful completion of their initial teacher education, Graduate teachers are required to "Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages". See AITSL standards.



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