



RECONCILING THE CULTURAL GAP

Position Paper

Imagine...

Imagine an Australian education where educators confidently showcase the Indigenous astronomical knowledge from the story of Tagai in the Torres Strait Islands, where students in the classroom learn about how celestial bodies such as the stars that form the Tagai constellation guided the Torres Strait Islander Peoples across the seas, signaled seasons for cultivation and ceremonies, and informed sustainable resource management practices in the region.

Our Position

Australia's education system has an opportunity to embrace the rich histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. While progress has been made, there is still a 'cultural gap' in many classrooms as identified by Hogarth (2022). Bridging this gap requires system-level support for teachers with knowledge, preparedness, resources, and ongoing professional development. By prioritising Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum and advocating for support to do this, we can equip educators and schools to share the wisdom and experiences of Australia's First Peoples with all students. This is an essential step towards promoting greater understanding, respect, and reconciliation in our society.

Closing the Cultural Gap

Historical exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures from Australian education represents a profound failure with far-reaching consequences. This systemic erasure has perpetuated harmful stereotypes, suppressed Indigenous narratives, and deprived educators of necessary cultural understanding. Hogarth (2022) emphasises how this 'cultural gap' has entrenched marginalisation, suppressing Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems. The impact extends beyond classrooms, permeating society and sustaining social disadvantages faced by First Peoples. This omission has significantly influenced our collective consciousness, hindering the development of a truly inclusive national identity and impeding progress towards genuine reconciliation.

Developing the Capacities of a Non-Indigenous Majority Workforce

The vast majority of Australia's teachers are of non-Indigenous backgrounds, demonstrating the need for learning support and guidance to build necessary cultural frames of reference and sustained professional learning opportunities to navigate this content with the respect and nuance it demands. This combination of limited knowledge, insufficient training, and uncertainty has led to the unintentional perpetuation of misinformation and harmful stereotypes (Auld et al., 2016), undermining the very policy goals set for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges.

What Teachers Say

The 2023 Australian Teachers' Survey laid bare the magnitude of this challenge, with a staggering 45 percent of respondents feeling ill-prepared to teach the cross-curricula priorities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures (Ellis et al., 2023). This statistic is a reflection of the systemic failures that have plagued our education system. In addition to COVID-19 disruptions and teacher shortages exacerbating workload pressures, increasing emphasis on standardised testing and performance metrics have further strained resources. Consequently, the nuanced teaching of Indigenous histories and cultures is often deprioritised or reduced to a compliance exercise, as educators struggle to balance these complex demands with the pressure to meet measurable outcomes.

Calls to Action

We challenge **educators, educational leaders, and educational institutions**, from early childhood centres to universities, to critically examine their curricula, teaching practices, and institutional cultures to identify and address any biases, stereotypes, or marginalisation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, as well as identify opportunities to strengthen this work.

We urge the **Australian government and education authorities** to provide adequate funding and resources to support initiatives, which aim to amplify Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in education.

References

- Auld, G., Dyer, J., & Charles, C. (2016). Dangerous Practices: The Practicum Experiences of Non-Indigenous Pre-Service Teachers in Remote Communities. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(6). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2016v41n6.9>
- Hogarh, M. (2022). An analysis of education academics' attitudes and preconceptions about Indigenous Knowledges in initial teacher education. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 51(2). <https://doi.org/10.55146/ajie.v51i2.41>

How Teachers Feel

"[...] teachers feel a little unsettled for various reasons to not teach it. It's not for a lack of wanting to, its [sic] more around confidence and having the background knowledge to add this into their classrooms."

– Practicing teacher,
Ngarrngga research

We call upon **governments and educational policymakers** to prioritise the meaningful integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledges into the national curriculum across all subject areas and grade levels.

We encourage **all Australians**, regardless of their background, to engage with and learn about the histories, cultures, and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This can be achieved through attending cultural events, reading works by Indigenous authors, and seeking out opportunities for respectful dialogue and knowledge-sharing.