



NURTURING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Position Paper

Imagine...

Imagine a STEM educator showcasing the wonders of freshwater ecosystems and their significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They could highlight one of many collaborative projects in their local area, such as those in the Murray-Darling Basin, restoring native fish passages bridging Traditional Ecological Knowledge with Western science. Elders provide crucial data on traditional fishing grounds and migration patterns, while scientists use techniques like radio-tagging. Together they identify barriers limiting fish movement and design solutions like modified fishways for species like the shortfinned eel. Through contemporary examples bridging Indigenous wisdom and science, the educator conveys the deep interconnection between land, water, and Indigenous knowledges.

Our Position

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in education creates identity-affirming environments where Indigenous learners feel safe and able to thrive. It also empowers all Australians with the knowledge and values to collaboratively forge a more equitable and intellectually rich future. By centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives, knowledges, and cultural representations, education can cultivate cultural pride, increased sense of belonging, and foster a deeper societal commitment to genuine reconciliation.

Are We Doing Enough to Enact Global and National Priorities?

International and national policy documents advocate for and emphasise the necessity of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures within educational frameworks. Although these global policies and initiatives provide guiding frameworks for best practices and principles on an international scale, they do not carry legal obligations for member countries. The degree to which these policy assertions are implemented is ultimately left to the discretion of individual nations, who must translate and enact these principles into their own domestic laws and policies.

Within the Australian context, most notably, the *Closing the Gap* policy, a comprehensive strategy aimed at addressing disadvantages faced by Indigenous peoples, aligns with global frameworks by recognising the significance of cultural identity and the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems as crucial elements in the education of Indigenous learners (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). The importance of cultural identity and belonging are reiterated further as key principles in other national strategies and frameworks including the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2015) and *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (V2.0)* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022).



Empowering Identity and Belonging

The cultivation of a positive self-identity is widely acknowledged as a pivotal factor influencing the educational achievement and wellbeing of Indigenous students. While positive self-identity is shaped by various factors, including home and community environments, schooling experience also plays a significant role in this process. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, it is particularly crucial that their cultural identities are recognised and valued as integral components of their self-identity, as research has demonstrated a strong correlation between this recognition and their academic performance and engagement (Purdie et al., 2000; Andersen, 2019). Teachers can play a significant role in speaking back to deficit discourses that have permeated Indigenous education for decades by applying a strengths-based approach to their teaching and developing relationships founded on high expectations with Indigenous learners (Shay et al., 2021).

Intentionally showcasing the richness and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures throughout the curriculum, educational institutions have the potential to convey deep respect and recognition for the value of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems. When students witness their own and others' histories and cultures represented and seen as a strength within the school context, it enables them to develop a sense of pride in their cultural and self-identities, fostering a sense of belonging within their broader educational community.

Teachers Understand this Importance

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

– Practicing teacher, Ngarrngga research

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.

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.

References

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