

Culture works

Three Indigenous teachers talk about their achievements and what's needed from governments to support their ongoing success.

As an Indigenous teacher, I'm proud of the fact that I can be a representative of a minority group out the front of the class. I'm pleased to be able to teach and model Aboriginal culture to non-Indigenous students.

I can also see many positive developments that come out of the good rapport I have with Aboriginal parents. They are able to relate to me. Often they are extended family, and it's wonderful for young Indigenous kids in the school to be able to tell their white mates that Ms Reynolds is their auntie.

I'm always particular about teaching the true history of Australia. I like being able to inform students about some of the lesser-known Indigenous figures who were key players in assisting some of the early European explorers. One example is the tracker Tommy Windich, who is buried in Esperance. I also talk about the Aboriginal descendants of John Forrest, the former premier of WA.

It's my view that governments should be concerned about social

Robyn Reynolds

Teacher, East Victoria Park Primary School, WA

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justice and equal opportunity for Indigenous people. This concern has to go beyond rhetoric and lead to funding and support for initiatives. It means ensuring that the WA Department of Education and Training continues to support programs such as 'Follow the Dream', which is designed to assist Indigenous high school children with the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

In terms of school resources, it means ensuring that there is genuine support for Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) in our schools. These officers are placed in schools to assist Indigenous students in areas like literacy and numeracy. However,

they can miss out on the mentoring and assistance they require. Another challenge is that schools entitled to an AIEO don't always have one. Sometimes school administrators or district offices may not realise that schools with a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are usually entitled to an AIEO. I'm very proud of the fact that I am a member of the executive of the State Schools Teachers' Union. And I'm also proud to be representing Aboriginal teachers, community members and students at the national forum level of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee (ATSIEC) of the AEU.

THELON KIRKMAN

“Our aim is to include Koorie perspectives right across the curriculum.”

Julie McHale

Teacher,
Winters Flat
Primary School,
Castlemaine, VIC

When I first started teaching 30 years ago, many Indigenous kids were disadvantaged due to discriminatory attitudes. One incident from back then still shocks me. I was a remedial reading teacher and a Year 4 boy was sent to me. He was as good a reader as I was, but the principal said he needed to be in my remedial class because he was Koorie! I hope things have improved significantly since then.

For the past two decades, I've taught in a range of different Victorian schools that have smaller numbers of Koorie students. That in itself can create challenges, because the funding tends to go to schools with large Koorie populations. At my current school, where 14 out of 280 students are Indigenous, we don't attract any specific funding for Koorie Support Workers and the like.

Moreover, a number of government programs, which I felt were really successful, have been scrapped. One brought Koories into schools to speak to the students. Another allocated funding towards tutoring for Koorie kids who were underperforming.

That's been replaced in Victoria by extra funding to help Indigenous students who get substandard results in their AIMS Test. But, because those tests only happen in Year 3 and 5, the assistance can come too late to help a kid who's really fallen behind.

Nonetheless, my school works hard to overcome disadvantage for Indigenous students and we have developed a fantastic Koorie Education Policy. Our aim is to include Koorie perspectives right across the curriculum. We don't just do a big shindig for Reconciliation Week and then forget about it. In maths, for

example, students might look at the traditional numbering system of the local Koorie population, the Jaara Jaara people, who used a binary counting system, based on symbols for 'one' and 'two'. There were no numbers beyond 10 because there was no need for them. All of that is really exciting for kids.

It's very satisfying to think that I've helped to educate a lot of Koorie students. I can think of one who recently came into my class totally disengaged. He'd been to several different schools and was struggling with study and regular attendance. But he's really started to improve because he knows that I expect him to do well. And because Indigenous perspectives are integrated into our curricula, I often consult him in front of the other children. This gives him a sense of responsibility and shows that his knowledge is valuable. ▶

Annette Rutherford

Principal, Builyan State School, QLD

I've been teaching infants for most of my 20-year teaching career. I loved teaching Year 1, because, when I saw them reading at the end of the year, I knew it was me who taught them to do that. And when a kid came into my class with low reading skills and I got them close to average reading, I knew that I was making an impact. It's the best feeling.

For the last 18 months I've been working outside the classroom on Indigenous projects in central Queensland. One project is known as Akaltye-Gladstone. The name comes from an Arrente word meaning 'opportunity to learn' and is pronounced 'a-cul-cha'. The project was developed with the Centre for Appropriate Technology in Alice Springs and aims to get Indigenous kids interested in science and technologies.

We take the students on a five-day camp and in the following six months teach curriculum lessons that link the material with the science curriculum they are following at school. We show a link to the traditional technologies Indigenous people have used in the hope that they will continue to take science subjects, and even consider it for a career.

It's fantastic seeing the kids getting so excited about science and to see the positive results. Just the other day, a parent rang to tell me



CRAIG CHAPMAN

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their son in Year 8 had received an A grading for a big assessment task on water filtration. This is a direct result of work we did on the course.

If everyone learnt more about Aboriginal culture at school, it would make a big difference. A solid Aboriginal studies curriculum will mean that in 20 years the whole of society will be better informed.

It's my view that the government needs to work harder to make Indigenous people more visible.

At the moment, the image of Australia presented here and overseas does not include Aboriginal people. We need positive coverage of Aboriginal experience. We've got exciting stories and they need to be told.

Similarly, the government has to listen to Aboriginal voices, and then take action on those ideas. For years, governments have been making decisions for us, without hearing what we're saying. The most successful and satisfying projects are the ones that involve Indigenous people, rather than just white bureaucrats. ●

Interviews by freelance journalist, PAUL SOMERVILLE.