



Submission
to the
Productivity Commission review into the National
Agreement on Closing the Gap

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Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents 198,000 members including 2,900 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and is the largest educational representative body for First Nations educators in the preschool, school and TAFE sectors in Australia. This submission is made on behalf of AEU's committee of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members Yalukit Yulendj, and all AEU members. The AEU is the largest educational representative body of First Nations teachers and educators in the preschool, school and TAFE sectors in Australia. As workers in Australia's public education institutions, AEU members collectively educate over 200,00 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students each year. 82.9% of the 249,103 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students in Australia attend public schools¹.

Education is the most essential pathway to provide students opportunities and offer lifelong benefit. Thus, in order to level the playing field, properly funding public education must be key.

This includes offering free and easily accessible Early Childhood Education (ECE) for all 3- and 4-year-olds around the country, funding public schools at 100% of Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), rebuilding and funding of TAFEs and resourcing attracting and retaining teachers, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

This submission is relevant to all four priority reform areas in the current Closing the Gap strategy and includes a particular emphasis the socio-economic indicators 3 to 6 covering the educational pathway from Early Childhood Education, through school to vocational and tertiary education. It emphasises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices must be at the centre of all policy making and that in considering the success of its socio-economic indicators the next Closing the Gap strategy must avoid continuing to use a deficit discourse and must instead adopt a strength-based approach to monitoring progress.

Bringing Voice to policy

Highly successful programs are community-driven and community-led and offer consistency and sustained support. Policy must include communities and First Nation voices in their development and implementation and programs must consult with and collaborate with communities and come from an anti-bias and anti-racist place that supports sovereignty. The AEU supports The Uluru Statement From the Heart and Voice. Treaty. Truth. Specifically, the AEU wishes to emphasise the importance of Truth-telling in schools through curriculum and in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. The AEU recognises the potential of Voice and Truth-telling to provide continued support and guidance for education policy and to recognise a variety of learning styles, achievements and outcomes, which can benefit all students and keep more students engaged in education. In particular, *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): 10 Truths to centre Indigenous Australians' voices to create workplace inclusion*² provides a succinct list of steps that education policy makers, school leaders and all teachers should familiarise themselves with and commit to taking.

¹ ABS, 2021 Census

² UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research & Diversity Council Australia, *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) Infographic*, retrieved from https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_gariyala_report-infographic_0.pdf

An example of how the AEU works with Aboriginal and First Nations communities is through the Yalukit Yulendj committee. Made of up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members from around Australia, the committee has responsibility for policy in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching and students and advises AEU leadership of broader policy needs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and the position that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members want to take across all AEU policy. The committee is made up of 16 representatives, one from schools and one from TAFE from each of the eight states and territories, elected by and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the AEU. The committee represents many communities across Australia.

Rethinking collaboration

Often collaboration is seen as one group working within the boundaries set by the more dominant group, however it doesn't have to be that way. Government should prioritise community-devised and community-driven projects and fund them properly. When it comes to lasting change, the change must be sustainable, typically gradual, and longer-term goals should be as much a priority as short term or emergency measures. Practically this means governments must trust communities and utilise and build on existing inclusive and supportive based infrastructure – such as public education institutions – to be delivery partners in programs, rather than outsourcing to private companies that do not have lasting ties or partnerships with communities.

One example is the ability and further potential that TAFE institutes and schools support and nurture students in vocational education by being able to deliver on a broad range of courses and qualifications with a student wellbeing focus both on TAFE campuses and through VET in Schools. Many TAFEs have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centres and support officers to ensure that staff and students are culturally safe in their learning and teaching environment. VET in Schools offerings allow learning in communities where a TAFE campus may not be accessible. TAFEs can collaborate with communities to deliver programs that the communities want to see, and communities should be involved in the course offerings and teaching in their regions.

The bottom line is that there must be acknowledgement that the system itself is the problem and both anti-bias and anti-racist approaches are needed within government interactions, programs, institutions and policymaking, alongside trust in communities to understand, set and drive what works on a local level.

Deficit discourse

One of the major sources of distrust in and lack of engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the overwhelming negativity of language and discourse around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Yalukit Yulendj would like to recommend caution around language use when speaking on issues about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – semantics matters – and instead encourage transitioning to strength-based language.

Taking a positive framework approach to conversations, writing and thinking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, cultures and issues not only shares

essential information in a positive way, it also allows entire communities to not feel downtrodden and less than. Why focus on disadvantage? Why marginalise? Why other? The “othering” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is dangerous in terms of racism, community trust and the very wellbeing of the people the Closing the Gap strategy is aimed to help and support, and needs to be urgently addressed. This is not to say that there shouldn’t be recognition that disadvantage exists, but it’s time to shift the narrative to one of hope and opportunity.

A strength-based approach is also practical in that it looks for opportunities to complement and support existing strengths and capacities, rather than having to rebuild from the ground up each time. Yalukit Yulendj calls on governments, officials and researchers to focus on what is working and not just what is not working.

For example, the 2022 Closing the Gap report states 63% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians aged 20 to 24 had finished Year 12, which is a significant increase from 48.7% in 2011. Yet instead of looking at what is working (this significant improvement), most reporting compares the 63% with the percentage of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completing Year 12. The focus then becomes individualised and othered when indeed solutions may need to be addressed firstly at the systemic level through considerations of resourcing and accessibility.

When the statistics are broken down further for example, the excellent retention in ACT versus the lower rates in NT can be attributed to a variety of factors but it’s hard to look past the fact that in 2022 ACT government schools are funded at 103% of SRS (school resourcing standard – the minimum amount a school needs), while NT schools are funded at only 80%. Over the period of the current schools funding agreement (NRSA 2020-2023) this means there’s a cumulative funding gap of over \$880 million for Northern Territory government schools. Additionally private schools with higher retention rates than government schools can also be attributed to funding discrepancies – in 2022 government funding of ACT private schools is at 107.8% of SRS and in the NT 95.8%, yet the lack of funding for public schools, where the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled is not being urgently addressed by governments.

At the school level, deficit discourse can be addressed with students through teachers and teaching practises. The AEU recognises the importance of Language and representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers’ voices, and the central leadership role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators must play in schools.

Rethinking meaning

The way Closing the Gap is set up and what it wants to achieve, what it even considers as achievement and how it measures achievement needs to be reconsidered. It’s worth asking again: What are we valuing? What is success?

For example, standardised testing points to literacy levels being lower in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students but many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are multi-lingual and English is not their first language – so why must literacy be based on English rather than the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language spoken as mother tongue?

We invite the Commission to also think about why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should fit into a colonial narrative? And why should they fit into an education system not accepting of culture and self? These are fundamental questions that remain unanswered and keep many students disengaged.

As Meera Varadharajan states in the Education Review in July 2022:

“Standardised testing and metrics are based on a model inherently developed on non-Indigenous terms and on deficit understandings, which fails to recognise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning of First Nations people³. This is despite evidence that suggests there is a plethora of social, environmental and cultural elements that play an important role in terms of generating and underpinning a successful learner⁴. For instance, there are valuable experiences and life skills gained from participating in Indigenous heritage, cultures, practices and languages.

In other words, there exists a central tension where the goals and purposes of education and what constitutes knowledge and success in learning in Indigenous cultures are different to mainstream understandings of educational successes⁵.”

What this means is:

- there is a failure to recognise that learning occurs in multiple settings and that much of the variation in student achievement is attributable to factors outside of school^{6,7}.
- commonly reported education indicators and outcomes do not fully capture students’ characteristics, capabilities and holistic learning experiences that occur both inside and outside school gates⁶.
- the value of community kinship and cultural identity and what it means to shape a young person are not being fully understood by society.

The 2021 *Amplify Insights: Education Inequity* report⁵ focused on program outcomes that not only led to improved attendance, engagement and learning of First Nations students, but also those that led to:

1. strengthened student pride in their culture with a growing understanding of their Indigenous heritage, and
2. a shift in whole-school culture through greater recognition, understanding and valuing of Indigenous culture.

It was found that where learning and pedagogy prioritised First Nations culture, knowledge and language, is built on shared understanding and values, is culturally responsive to diverse

³ Lowe K, Harrison N, Tennent C, Guenther J, Vass G, Moodie N. Factors affecting the development of school and Indigenous community engagement: a systematic review. *Aust Educ Res.* 2019 Apr;46(2):253–71.

⁴ Shergold P, Calma T, Russo S, Walton P, Westacott J, Zoellner D, et al. Looking to the future: Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training. [Internet]. Australia: Education Council; 2020. Available from: <https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/educationau/pathways/Final%20report%20-%2018%20June.pdf>

⁵ Varadharajan et al. (2021). *Amplify Insights: Education Inequity*. Centre for Social Impact, UNSW Sydney. Available from https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/amplify_insights_educationinequity_partone_full_report.pdf

⁶ Bonnor, C., Kidson, P., Piccoli, A., Sahlberg, P., Wilson R. Structural Failure: Why Australia keeps falling short of its educational goals. [Internet]. Sydney: UNSW Gonski Institute; 2021. Available from: https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Structural%20Failure_final.pdf

⁷ ASA (American Statistical Association). ASA Statement on using value-added models for educational assessment. 2014; Available from: <https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/POL-ASAVAM-Statement.pdf>

backgrounds and approached from a strength-based lens, they are shown to achieve better outcomes⁸.

Examples of programs and services that led to these kinds of outcomes were those that:

- embraced families, culture and community, with opportunities for parent-led learning and most importantly were non-tokenistic and built on trust, respect, reciprocity and shared understanding
- engaged students through activities that promoted traditional and contemporary Indigenous culture, finding ways to authentically involve the local Indigenous community, and providing Indigenous cultural activities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students
- partnered with parents, Elders and the community to nurture and facilitate cultural perspectives and co-construct programs and using various forums designed to ensure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice is heard
- embedded a culturally sustaining pedagogy in curriculum and teaching practices
- utilised various inclusive strategies such as involving local Elder and family; practising cultural sensitivity; making learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive; and ensuring rich and diverse epistemological legacy and multiple stories are reflected in curriculum, taught to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The report also found mechanisms to strengthen ties between home, schools and communities include:

- recognising families as first educators and engage families and communities in relationship building
- building and sustaining leadership connections between school staff and community leaders.

These findings underpin what Yalukit Yulendj is saying – that entire approaches need to be rethought and that it starts with resourcing and actively recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers

As the oldest living cultures on the planet, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have many millennia of knowledge of teaching and learning techniques. Much has been written about First Nations people's educational traditions around the world and the potential to benefit all students in not just incorporating but centring this knowledge in contemporary teaching and learning. This is why recruiting and retaining First Nations teachers is crucial for every single community in Australia.

The September 2016 *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI) Final Report*⁹ found “current, recent and past government policies for achieving improved and equitable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognise the pivotal role of education and increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres

⁸ Varadharajan et al. (2022). Amplify Insights: Education Inequity. Centre for Social Impact, UNSW Sydney. Available from https://www.csi.edu.au/media/uploads/amplify_insights_education_inequity_report.pdf

⁹ Buckskin, P. 2016 More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative Final Report. University of South Australia, 2016. [MATSI Final Report \(edutech.com.au\)](https://www.edutech.com.au/MATSI-Final-Report)

Strait Islander teachers in attaining this goal.” The aims of MATSITI and the recruitment program was successful and the opportunity to build on the highly effective work and outcomes of MATSITI should be considered as a matter of urgency. Thanks to MATSITI, between 2012 and 2015, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers increased by 16.5% due to recruitment and improved levels of First Nations identification.

The report states the government schooling sector is by far the most dominant employer with 94% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and highlighted several examples of highly effective career attraction campaigns aimed specifically at potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. The NSW Department of Education campaign, Join Our Mob8, for example included a scholarship program which supported 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates to train as teachers, with a guarantee of an appointment in a preferred location on graduation. In March 2016, a total of 1,165 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers were employed in the Department, including 132, or 11.3%, in promotional positions.

The positive outcomes from this work should be resurrected and built upon, as the end of the program has seen the gap in Aboriginal teachers versus representation in the teaching workforce stagnate and effectively decline.

In 2016 5.5% of Australian school students identified as First Nations, while just 2% of the teaching workforce identified as First Nations. In 2020, 6.2% of Australian school students identified as First Nations, while again, 2% of the teaching workforce identified as First Nations.

As reported by Aleryk Fricker, Lecturer, Indigenous Education, Deakin University and Glenn Auld, Senior lecturer in Education, Deakin University in *The Conversation* in November 2022¹⁰, there are two pathways for First Nations people into teaching - through teaching assistant jobs or through university, yet these programs have seen funding cut rather than boosted, despite comparatively positive outcomes and there is no national plan that offers support around the country.

“In many remote and rural schools, there is a strong workforce of First Nations teacher assistants. Programs to help Indigenous teaching assistants into teaching degrees have suffered from funding cuts, although the Northern Territory government, has recently announced it will increase professional development opportunities for remote Aboriginal teacher education. This includes school-based traineeships, grants and mentoring. The Federal Government’s draft plan to address teacher shortages also touches on this – mentioning Queensland’s plan to build pathways for First Nations teacher assistants and classroom teachers, by talking to TAFEs and universities. There is also the commitment to a First Nations teachers’ strategy, and initiatives to build the cultural capabilities of the non-Indigenous teacher workforce... but it lacks detail and a sense of national cohesion.”

Consideration also needs to go into where are focussing our attention. For example, the largest concentration of Aboriginal people in Australia is in Sydney¹¹ yet teacher recruitment programs tend to focus on regional and remote areas and metropolitan area universities lack essential support structures that offer culturally safe learning.

¹⁰ [The teacher shortage plan must do more to recruit and retain First Nations teachers \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/the-teacher-shortage-plan-must-do-more-to-recruit-and-retain-first-nations-teachers)

¹¹ <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/australia-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population-summary#:~:text=In%202021%2C%2037.1%25%20of%20Aboriginal,lived%20in%20capital%20city%20areas.>

Fricker and Auld also note this, saying: *“there is little detail in government plans about how First Nations school leavers – who mainly come from urban areas – can be encouraged to enter teaching degrees at university”*.

In their research, Fricker and Auld highlighted how past reviews state the importance of listening to, acting on and resourcing initiatives controlled by First Nations peoples.

“Lessons from past reviews highlight the merits of developing long-term, First Nations-led strategies and programs that provide real support for First Nations teachers.”

Decolonising classrooms

Fricker and Auld also stress the need for an agenda to decolonise classrooms.

“This requires teachers and schools to change their approaches to include First Nations contexts across all aspects of teaching and learning.

This means everything from what is taught to the way it is taught and the spaces they are taught in. This means including knowledge of First Nations cultures in the curriculum, using First Nations ways of teaching, Aboriginal flags and artworks on display, dedicated collections in school libraries, and spaces that allow for on-Country learning. It also needs to involve Elders and other community members in our schools.

Without these changes, schools themselves become barriers to First Nations teachers wanting to remain in the profession.”

Research has identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students doing teaching degrees at university then face racism, a lack of financial support, inflexible structures of university, limited access to technology, and isolation – all things that must be addressed as a priority.

The importance of Language and teaching on Country

Any discussion of cultural competency must begin with a conversation on language. The AEU believes that the definition of cultural competency should be based on the articles of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with particular focus on Article 14¹² :

- 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.*
- 2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.*
- 3. States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.*

¹² United Nations, *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, retrieved from https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

Teacher representation and including mandatory Initial Teacher Education modules and ongoing professional development for experienced teachers on teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a culturally competent and safe way would also go a long way in reducing racism, othering and boosting new ways of learning.

We know that practical learning through everyday experience can teach literacy and numeracy skills in more meaningful way, and teaching on Country affords this.

Resourcing and early education

Dr Sue Thompson, Deputy CEO of ACER, who wrote the TIMSS 2019 report¹³, noted that:

“Acknowledging that the primary underlying factor behind poor achievement is socioeconomic background, and finding ways of redressing the imbalance in opportunities and resources available to these students, will help lift achievement for all Australian students.”

And one of the easiest ways to help rebalance and engage stems from early childhood education. The extreme benefits of ECE for literacy, numeracy and education engagement by offering free 3- and 4-year preschool Australia wide is clear, and has been confirmed time and time again by both Australian and international studies, including:

- COAG Reform Council (2012) found that Australian students who had attended more years of pre-primary education performed better on standardised testing in Year 4
- OECD (2014) found that students who had attended pre-primary education perform better in PISA at age 15, after accounting for the students’ socio-economic status.

They found that the duration of preschool has the largest impact on children’s emergent literacy at age five after parental education and income, and the largest impact among variables that can be controlled through immediate policy changes. The positive impact of at least two years of ECE on teen literacy is approximately 60% higher than less than two years of preschool and is equivalent to more than an entire year of schooling. Despite this, nearly one quarter of Australian children arrive at school without the skills they need to thrive. Conversely, a poor foundation in literacy prior to school entry not only reduces the likelihood of later success, but also increases the risk of children eventually ‘dropping out’ of formal education. Most countries provide two years of preschool in line with the international standard. Australia is one of 11 countries which only provides one year.

Support through education

Geoff Gallop in the report of his independent inquiry Valuing the Teaching Profession references the importance the Mparntwe (Alice Springs) Education Declaration places on supporting learners at all stages, from early childhood, the primary years, middle years and senior years. Each involves a transition, with the hope that in the process every student is encouraged and supported *“to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face”*.

To Close the Gap, we first need to properly fund public education.

¹³ ["TIMSS 2019 Australia. Volume I: Student performance" by Sue Thomson, Nicole Wernert et al. \(acer.edu.au\)](#)

Recommendations

- Ensure that programs are designed and implemented in collaboration with the communities where they are run
- Ensure that programs are properly designed to reflect and benefit the geographical and cultural considerations of the populations where they are run (eg. Sydney vs remote communities)
- Ensure that a strengths-based approach is taken to monitoring progress in future Closing the Gap reports
- That Closing the Gap takes a positive framework approach to reporting
- Recognise and highlight that properly funding public education is essential to Closing the Gap and that funding of free Early Childhood Education for all 3- and 4-years around Australia is essential to Closing the Gap
- That Closing the Gap acknowledges that the systems themselves are the problem and assessment and review considers the ongoing traumas of colonialism and the need to reconsider what achievement, success and education should look like with a decolonising lens

Additionally, the 5th National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Conference (NATSIEC) in 2018 made numerous recommendations that are very relevant to this review, which the AEU recommends, including the establishment of a community-led independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Institute to identify and promote evidence and best practice and the monitoring of the integrity and effectiveness of Indigenous education policy and practice. In particular, NATSIEC emphasised that Indigenous youth must be afforded a significant voice in education policy and delivery that impacts on the lives of young people. NATSIEC also recommended the re-instatement and continuity of funding for Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies in all jurisdictions as the primary means for community voices to be heard in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and delivery, and we believe this approach is relevant to the Closing the Gap strategy.

The AEU endorses all these recommendations from NATSIEC and makes the following additional recommendations in relation to ensuring that the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and teachers are embedded in the next iteration of the Closing the Gap strategy:

- That a comprehensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching workforce strategy is instated, that builds on the outcomes of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI).
- That all schools should explicitly state a policy of zero tolerance to racism from staff and students.
- That state and territory Departments of Education provide resources and the time needed to enable all teachers to undertake annual or (at a minimum) biennial professional development studies in cultural competency.
- That ITE must include mandatory units in cultural competency throughout all years of study.
- That protocols are developed for the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures that include when permission needs to be requested from elders.
- That the accreditation of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers recognise the specific pedagogical and cultural experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander teachers and career pathways are introduced which recognise this expertise.

This Review should also consider the importance and benefits of Language learning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly the role of bi- and multilingualism in education and First Nations languages in assisting student learning, which has been validated by well-established national and international research.

Appendix

Following are recent print articles examples that highlight specific programs and schools that the Commission could consider as case studies for future Closing the Gap reports:

1. An article from the *Australian Educator* on Ernabella Anangu School
2. An article from the *Northern Territory News* about the Learning on Country program
3. An article from the *Australian Educator* on First Nations languages in schools
4. An article from the *Australian Educator* on First Nations teachers around Australia

Also included are excerpts from an article from NPR in the USA on how intergenerational trauma counselling could be considered in relation to the 2022 Federal Budget announcement for supporting student wellbeing.

Respect for connections

Looking to Country for Inspiration has helped a teacher and his students create and share learning opportunities.

BY MARGARET PATON

When junior primary teacher Akash Krishna was running a maths lesson to increase fluency in his classroom, he needed a breakthrough.

"My Year 1, 2 and 3 students were really struggling to count on a number line," he says. "We'd even experimented with lines from zero to 10 and from zero to 20 and used an abacus.

Some students were getting it, but everyone needed consolidation."

So, for ideas, the Ernabella Anangu School teacher, based in South Australia's remote Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, turned to first language educator Daphne Nyangu, who team teaches with him.

"Look to Country," was her response, to connect the learning to something tactile and sensory based.

Enter *witjuti* (witchetty) grubs.

Krishna and Nyangu took the students on Country with their families and elders to collect the grubs to take back to class.

"Each student had one wriggling on their palm and they had to find ways of keeping track of how many grooves theirs had. They compared size, number and length with one another. The grubs became their little number lines," says Krishna.

8 WAYS OF LEARNING

Instruction at the K-12 school focuses on the eight ways of Aboriginal learning. This includes community links, deconstruction, reconstruction, nonlinear links, non-verbal learning maps and story sharing. Relationships are key too.

In class, Krishna models mistake-making and self-correction as his students teach him their first languages.

"They flip it and I become the student and they use the same processes to teach me certain sounds in their language," he says. He's now become semi-fluent in Pitjantjatjara.

Krishna is following in the footsteps of his teacher mother, who worked in the APY Lands when he was young. When he returned as a teacher himself, he was able to connect with community members



(Above) Daphne Nyangu and Akash Krishna; (below) *witjuti* (witchetty) grubs proved useful in connecting learning with Country.



Why do you teach?

We want to hear your tips for engaging young minds.

Email: educator@hardiegrant.com
if you have something to share. You can provide a written piece or we'd love to interview you.

he'd met and known as a 10-year-old.

As a pre-service teacher at the University of South Australia, Krishna did a placement in the APY Lands, and started work there soon after graduating at the end of 2018.

A year later he gained permanency and was fully accredited by the end of last year.

"Being invited to teach on the lands here is a whole other world to mainstream classrooms with differences in culture, language, community voice and pedagogical voice, plus the weather has eight seasons," he says.

That's why "one-dimensional forms of teaching" using worksheets or reading off a script don't resonate with him. Krishna gives credit to the school's former principal, Erin McQuade, for impressing upon him to respect the links between students, school, family, community and Country.

"I also give a lot of credit to Daphne. She's worked at the school for eight years and honestly, I would not be the educator I am without her. She's my guide, mentor, support, friend, and a future leader of the community," Krishna says.

Margaret Paton is a freelance writer and a casual K-12 teacher.



THE PROGRAM HELPING KIDS STAY IN SCHOOL

Northern Territory News (Australia)

By AMANDA PARKINSON

31 Aug 2022

A SUCCESSFUL ranger program that fosters stronger connection between Aboriginal children and their cultural land will be expanded.

The program's decade of success has drawn a further \$29.4m investment to expand it reach across the Territory and Australia.

Learning on Country¹⁴ currently exists in 15 sites but will soon be rolled out in four more schools over the next six years.

The Northern Land Council has connected Aboriginal ranger groups with Territory schools to integrate 'both ways learning', which has shown to increase school participation and provide pathways for employment.

The federal government earlier this month committed the funding to expand its reach.

NLC chairman Samuel Bush-Blansi said the funding ensured remote Indigenous students had access to education pathways that support them to walk "strong in our culture and Balanda culture." "Our children are the future and I want to see them get the right education and go on to live healthy and fulfilling lives and care for their families, community and Country – this program creates that pathway for them," he said.

Officials in August gathered in Katherine to celebrate the program's success. Rangers bring valuable knowledge of land and sea management – guided by Traditional Owners – to the Learning on Country program plays which helps develop the next generation of custodians.

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Linda Burney said the investment ensures more people benefit from the program and can stay connected to their history.

"Supporting First Nations students to engage with their schooling in this way and prioritise learning on Country nurtures an increased sense of identity and self-esteem," she said. "By integrating culture and Country into the school curriculum, remote Aboriginal students can walk strong in both worlds and be given more paths to success."

¹⁴ <https://learningoncountry.com/>

Learning with First Nations' languages

BY LEANNE TOLRA

Regions are leading the way with community-driven language programs, and the federal government has committed to \$14 million to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, but it must be done in partnership with communities.

There's a groundswell of support for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages across the country, but career pathways and community-based teacher training opportunities are vital to ensure strong student outcomes and preserve language.

Anangu is a Pitjantjatjara word meaning "people" and aptly describes the collective, community-based approach to language and learning Kenmore Park Anangu School in Yuniyarinyi, in the APY (Anangu, Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara) Lands 1400 kilometres north of Adelaide.

The school's 12 Aboriginal students take daily lessons in language and culture from Pitjantjatjara Elder Marianne Fraser, her niece Mary Fraser and nephew Aaron Fraser, who spend time on Country as part of their learning each week.

Principal Wilbur Klein (known to locals as Charlie) says the school has a community agreement that it will promote reading, writing and literacy in both Pitjantjatjara and English, with Pitjantjatjara as the dominant language and a strong focus on Country, led by the community.

This focus on local language and community connection improves student engagement, and their ability to learn. "Our belief and experience are that when kids learn their own language it improves their ability to learn English, and it supports their identity and wellbeing," Klein says.

IN SHORT

// A number of schools around Australia have implemented innovative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and culture programs to enhance student learning.

// Language programs offer many benefits – not only supporting students' identity and wellbeing, but also preserving languages for future generations.

"We can see that it makes kids happy; and in watching Marianne and Aaron and Mary, we can see that not only are students learning to read competently in Pitjantjatjara, but that their confidence and success are transferring to their ability to read and learn English."

LEGACY OF LANGUAGE

The other major benefit of teaching local languages is being able to preserve language for future generations.

"Pitjantjatjara is one of only 12 languages considered to still be intact across the country and these languages are predominantly in central Australia and the NT. Our group of schools are working towards the retention and development of those languages," Klein says.

As a child growing up in the 1970s Fraser was taught English in school and learned Pitjantjatjara by listening to her father. Her immersive culture and language program includes a phonics program that teaches Pitjantjatjara sounds based on character representations, which she developed based on English-language phonics education methods. "A lot of it is simply reading, writing and talking with me and Aaron and Mary," she says.

Klein says the results of the program – which is based on the Two-way Science model developed by the CSIRO, which supports bilingual education, lessons on Country, and formative assessment – are overwhelmingly positive.

"The Two-way Science model uses Anangu knowledge on Country to start the teaching of science and excite the students. They become connected and gain confidence and interest in learning. We then use that on-Country science to teach more science back in the classroom and it becomes part of a whole-curriculum approach.

"While subjects like reading English and learning maths are not left behind across our group of schools, there is an emphasis on teaching our students both ways of learning," Klein says. Our agreement with the local Aboriginal community quite clearly states that the number-one values are Country, culture and language."

PHOTOGRAPHY: EDWARD P. 12 STATE SCHOOLS



(from left) Lachlan McKenzie, Cassie Opperman, Geoffrey Price, Corey Appo and Preston Parter from Eidsvold P-12 State School; (below) Eidsvold's student numbers are growing as a result of the Wakka Wakka language and culture program.



Our student numbers are growing and that's directly because of our offering of the Wakka Wakka language and culture program.



Preston Parter
Eidsvold P-12 State School

"We know that when kids are on Country they're happier. And when I go into the classroom and Marianne is teaching with Mary and Aaron, I can see that the kids are engaged and their learning is exceptional.

"It's a different dynamic to when they are learning English and it connects them. There's a group who have become more advanced in their writing and are further along with their phonics and vocabulary and they want to learn more."

LOSS AND REVIVAL

Language revival and teacher qualifications are key at Eidsvold P-12 State School in east-central Queensland, where the program is a model in the region.

Principal Preston Parter, from the Birri Gubba language group, says the school's Wakka Wakka Yumbin language reclamation program has been running for almost six years. Despite being from a different language group, Parter has returned to the classroom to support the school's dance and language teacher aide Corey Appo from the local Wakka Wakka language group.

Yumbin means "all of us" or "everyone" in Wakka Wakka and Appo and the 117 students at Eidsvold School are working in partnership with a local language advisory group to develop their language program. Sixty-five per cent of students identify as Aboriginal, and 35 per cent hail from the local community and surrounding properties.

"Aunty Doris (Wakka Wakka Elder Doris Beezley) plays a massive part in the community work through meetings and consultation," says Parter.

"We are beginning to more confidently put sentences and grammatical structure

PHOTOGRAPHY: EIDSVOLD P-12 STATE SCHOOL; ANTHONY MONEE

(right) Jannette McCormack heads up the Arrernte Secondary Project at Alice Springs Language Centre.



together, which is an important step forward in the revival of Wakka Wakka and this has been possible because of the extensive support from (linguist) Daniel Majchrzak as there are no fluent speakers left.

"Families are telling us that is why they want their children to attend our school," says Parter. "Our student numbers are growing and that's directly because of our offering of the Wakka Wakka language and culture program."

PATHWAYS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Arrernte Secondary Project at Alice Springs Language Centre in the Northern Territory is creating pathways for Aboriginal language teachers during their secondary school education. Its programs teach students the Arrernte language and other local dialects and support them to apply for language-based work.

Jannette McCormack, from the Arrernte language group and an educator who has spent more than 30 years teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Alice Springs public schools, heads the innovative program, which has helped students to become more engaged with school and increased attendance rates. It also offers opportunities for students to incorporate their own language in further study and employment. The students are encouraged to pursue Certificate II and III in Applied Language in Arrernte or their own language and some have gone on to complete Stage 2 Australian Languages.

"Over the years, I've found Aboriginal students are natural language learners because they grow up learning to speak both their mother tongue and English," McCormack says. "Our students want to learn their language because they

can see that it will offer them jobs in the future. Then they want to share what they have learned with the younger ones."

McCormack has supported five school-based trainees to become Arrernte educators and they now work in Alice Springs schools. She has also supported a Pertame student (Southern Arrernte) to begin working as an apprentice at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory. Some of the trainees are also completing formal teacher training while working in the school's language program.

LANGUAGE INTO THE FUTURE

Beau Williams, the chief executive officer of First Languages Australia, who is from the Murrawari language group in north-west New South Wales, says the federal government's commitment to spend \$14 million to employ 60 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and expand first languages' education in primary schools across the country reflects an increased community awareness of the value and place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

"For many years community language teachers have worked hard to share their language and culture with younger generations, despite inadequate pay and conditions. We are now seeing greater recognition of the importance of our languages," he says.

"For our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, learning language is a

source of pride and connection to their culture. For non-Indigenous children, it's a fantastic introduction to the richness of Australia's linguistic and cultural history. Teaching language in schools will increase understanding and respect."

Williams says that while language teaching is an integral part of the truth and reconciliation process, schools must be mindful of history and remain constantly aware that generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were denied the right to speak their languages.

"That's why language teaching needs to be community driven, and community led. Because if a school starts teaching language and the community aren't ready for it, it will cause upset and further trauma," he says.

Williams says the government's commitment to hire more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators is "a great step in the right direction". However, he says appropriate career pathways and training opportunities are needed for success.

"There is no one-size-fits-all solution here. The best results will be achieved through multiple education and training pathways."

Leanne Tolra is a freelance writer and Australian Educator's sub-editor.



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Nurturing our First Nations workforce

Genuine school, community and policy support structures are vital to attracting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to the profession.

BY LEANNE TOLRA PHOTOS PETER FISHER

18 // SPRING 2022

(pictured) Nuenonne man Nathaniel Golder is the only Aboriginal teacher at Seaton High School, a school of 1200 students in suburban Adelaide.

The eyes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and researchers are closely fixed on the Labor government's plan to fix teacher shortages. How will Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers be supported as part of this plan?

Educator and PhD research candidate at the University of Queensland Ren Perkins says he's looked into the plan but can't see "anything that is specifically looking at or encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers".

Just 2 per cent of fully qualified Australian teachers, around 9000, are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Census 2016), but anecdotal evidence indicates their numbers are declining.

"I'm still undertaking the data collection for my PhD but, from what I've found so far, having a support structure - both outside of schools and within schools - and having mentors to encourage teachers are key to attracting and retaining teachers, especially when things get tough," Perkins says.

A Quandamooka man from Queensland's North Stradbroke Island, who is teaching and working on Country, Perkins says his research shows this connection is another vital element to attracting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

"We are natural teachers - it's in our DNA - it's the way we do business," he says. "We have a passion for teaching and a strong desire to be role models not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but for all students."



IN SHORT

// Just 2 per cent of qualified teachers are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

// More support and mentors are key to retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

// We also need greater representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at all levels of decision making.

"I'm really hoping my PhD research impacts policymakers and that they will listen to the voices of Indigenous teachers, who are experienced and who have contributed so much to the whole education system," he says.

Attracting and recruiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers was the focus of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI), funded by the Labor government from 2012-2015 and Perkins hopes that this government will support it again.

Perkins also points to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, released in 2021, as evidence of the widely understood need for incentives be offered to teachers in regional, rural and remote locations from diverse backgrounds.

"Indigenous teachers and education support personnel bring knowledge, lived experience and skills to schools. They are able to teach Australia's full history, the importance of reconciliation, knowledge of Country, understanding of kinship groups, Indigenous languages, community dynamics and politics - and these lessons have implications for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike," he says.

MORE THAN JUST TALK

There remains an acute difference in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

A range of initiatives and programs, that have demonstrated positive results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be revived under the next iteration of the National School

(pictured) Students at Seaton High School with teacher Nathaniel Golder.



Reform Agreement (NSRA). For example, Northern Territory schools funded under the National Partnership Agreement on Low SES School Communities saw funded primary schools make greater literacy and numeracy gains than unfunded schools.

While resources are a crucial part of closing the gap in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities, so too is a seat at the table.

Principal of Cabbage Tree Island Public School in NSW Dyonne Anderson says there is an urgent need for wider representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices at all levels of education decision making and policymakers need to start listening.

Anderson, a Githabul woman who is president of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals' Association, a member of the NSW Deadly Leaders' Alliance, and an educator of 33 years, says the conversation about increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers needs to be diverse, inclusive and confront issues of systemic racism.

"So often we hear stories about how the system devalues the things Aboriginal teachers bring to the classroom. Aboriginal teachers who have been in the system for a long time say they are intimidated or made to feel worthless when they attempt to bring in another perspective, and so many of them are crushed," she says.

"To make real, long-term changes, we need to be talking to teachers within the system, including beginning teachers, not just academics and corporate staff sitting in universities who haven't been in



a classroom for decades.

"Most teachers come from a white middle-class background so that is the lens they operate from. You don't see the world as it is, you see it as you are. So, if you have never looked outside your own limited experience, it's very hard to know what you don't know," says Anderson.

She says Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are more than just specialists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; they are experts in

literacy, numeracy and school leadership, and human resources.

"There are so many great stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers who are changing lives every single day," says Anderson. "We are talking about some very credible, experienced teachers who are so busy teaching, that sometimes we don't look at the additional expertise that they have to offer."

ROLE MODELS FOR CHANGE

At the school level, the significant over representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students among those who do not meet proficiency benchmarks demonstrates the continued social stratification of school education in Australia, and senior secondary completion rates suggest that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, school is not a culturally safe place. Cultural intelligence and the promotion of cultural safety require constant learning.

Support structures and his own Aboriginal identity are strong influences in Nuenonne man Nathaniel Golder's first teaching job at Seaton High School in suburban Adelaide. He says role models are the key to increasing the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers across the country.

"For me, growing up as an Indigenous person meant that I never really saw myself working in an education setting. Having strong role models is one of the most imperative things that you can ask for as an educator," he says.

"Seeing Aboriginal people represented in school leadership roles teaches both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students what it really means to be Aboriginal."

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER FISHER

Seeing Aboriginal people represented in school leadership roles teaches both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students what it really means to be Aboriginal.

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Nathaniel Golder
Seaton High School, SA

Golder is the only Aboriginal teacher in the secondary school of 1200 students. He went to school at Kangaroo Island Community Education school, which he describes as “a very Caucasian environment with about seven or eight Aboriginal students who attended full time” and says his family history and his mixed-race background are other factors in developing his identity as a teacher.

“I’ve had to get to a point where I feel OK about expressing my Aboriginality as sometimes it’s difficult being

someone who doesn’t conventionally look Aboriginal, and being the only Aboriginal teacher,” he says. “I do feel quite supported at Seaton... It’s a great environment, but the school does suffer from the same lack of diversity that most schools around the country experience.”

It is crucial to the wellbeing of all communities, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, that the public education system provides access to quality, culturally appropriate education. AEU policy

calls on the next NSRA to include a comprehensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching workforce strategy that builds on the outcomes of the highly effective work of MATSITI in prioritising more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to work towards equitable outcomes for all students.

Leanne Tolra is a freelance writer and *Australian Educator’s* sub-editor



Supportive structures

New government initiatives announced in the October 2022 Federal Budget included funding to support student wellbeing – but there is more opportunity and need here than simply putting counsellors in schools. Counsellors should be appropriately educated in understanding generational trauma as starting point to better serve students who bear the weight of colonialism. The example below demonstrates how this approach has been successful overseas.

Excerpts from NPR article **How some therapists are helping patients heal by tackling structural racism**, November 25, 2022

Embracing a practice of 'decolonizing therapy'

Teng was initially inspired by people like Dr. Jennifer Mullan, who refer to this work as "decolonizing therapy," a process of addressing the structural racism and other forms of oppression that keep therapy from serving many marginalized communities.

"I think the best way to describe decolonized therapy is that it is really making space to examine the external pressures, stressors, and layers of oppression that my clients have endured and survived," Teng says.

She gives the example of microaggressions in the workplace, or job interviews. "There are opportunities that are not given to you because of your identities," she says, "But if we look at it through the lens of self-esteem, it's like 'Something is wrong with you. You just need to think better about yourself,' right? Like you need to be more positive."

But for people of color, that framework of just being "more positive" doesn't always work. It doesn't account for racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination directed toward them. "The challenge," Teng explains, "is to recognize that how you're feeling about yourself can also be internalized oppression."

Teng's practice in decolonizing therapy digs into family history, helping her clients of color better understand how the historical oppression of their ancestors affects them.

Using culturally responsive techniques

To respond to these issues, Teng has developed a few approaches that are different from the way she was trained. First, Teng often brings in the family to her practice.

Teng supports the children and parents in openly discussing experiences like racism and genocide in a secure and validating environment. She says many who survived the genocide, had to suppress their feelings. "And so, when you have the experience of suppressing those [painful] emotions, you're also suppressing joy and connection, belonging."

Growing acceptance of the role of historical trauma

Like Teng, Ramona Beltran became interested in decolonizing therapy because of the issues she was seeing in her community of origin. She identifies as Xicana of Yaqui and Mexica descent and is a professor of social work at the University of Denver.

She highlights three key aspects of culturally responsive therapy: building authentic relationships, ensuring community representation, and re-connecting with one's cultural background. Like Teng, Beltran is especially interested in working with clients to help them see their culture as a form of intergenerational strength, rather than suffering.

A growing need for culturally responsive therapy

While therapists like Beltran and Teng are committed to making therapy more inclusive, communities of color continue to struggle with getting access to therapists. Teng gets a lot of people contacting her who she simply cannot help. "I'm only licensed to see folks in my area, and there are so many that are interested. And it breaks my heart every time, where I'm not able to provide support."

And the largest professional organization of psychologists in the U.S. is also promising to make changes. Last year, the American Psychological Association issued a formal apology for its role in what it called "promoting, perpetuating and failing to challenge racism, racial discrimination and human hierarchy in the U.S."

Full article here:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/11/25/1137754258/heres-how-some-therapists-are-tackling-structural-racism-in-their-practice>