**Australian Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom**

In the last thirty years much progress has been made in creating equality and reconciling with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is still a need for great improvement.

While the question of how we can fully accommodate the aspirations of Aboriginal Australians remains, curriculum change can be seen as another step in the right direction. (Auguste, 2010, p 434) With the introduction of the Victorian Curriculum (AusVELS) and the developing national Australian Curriculum (2011), three cross curricula priorities for all schools have been established, including; “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and culture.”

Despite the challenges that face teachers in successfully implementing this priority, there are many benefits to be gained by the students and future generations of Australians.

**The representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within the curriculum and in the classroom**

*History*

For many years Australian children have been taught about the colonisation of Australia and the savage Aboriginal people that the early settlers encountered when they arrived. Therefore, when children encounter literature written by Aboriginal Australians that paints a different picture, they are often left feeling confused as to what the real Australian story is. (Leane, 2010, p 33)

As educators it is important that we present our students with the “true history of Australia.” (Sarra, 2011, p 616) In the spirit of continued reconciliation all Australian students should be encouraged to respect and rejoice in the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories are a part of the shared history of all Australians. (AusVELS, 2013)
The Australian Government recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were the first Australians and that they have the right to sustain their language and culture. (MCEECDYA, 2009, p 3) In alignment with this AusVELS (2013) states that in learning about the history of Australia students will “learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples prior to colonisation by the British.” Additionally, students will explore the “key policies and political movements” that have occurred over the last two centuries which have impacted these people. (AusVELS, 2013)

Sarra (2011) believes that if Australian students can develop a better understanding of the present situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people it will enable them to take action and make the future better for all Australians. (p 618)

**Culture**

AusVELS (2013) and the Australian Curriculum (2011) state that the three focuses when teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are; “Country/Place, People and Culture.” Each of these foci is of specific significance to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The relationship that Aboriginal people have with the land is one which can be difficult for many students to understand. Upon looking at a landscape, many people will be able to appreciate the beauty or serenity of what they view. Yet, an Aboriginal can look at the same landscape and see their place of worship, their library, their home and their cemetery. Which when approached from a western view point is a difficult concept to grasp.

In many schools Aboriginal perspectives are taught through dot paintings illustrating indigenous animals. Although, dot paintings were a way in which Aboriginal people from Arnhem Land expressed themselves, it is not the way in which Aboriginal groups from areas such as the Wurundjeri land would express themselves. This generalisation that all Aboriginal people are the same can be offensive to students of Aboriginal descent and indicates that the teacher is unfamiliar with the local culture.
Some schools have drawn upon the knowledge of Aboriginal parents or people in their community by inviting them to come to the school and discuss their culture and connections to place with students. By participating in authentic Aboriginal art projects or being involved in a traditional smoking ceremony, students are being engaged in learning rich experiences, which will lead them to a greater understanding of the Aboriginal culture. (Harrison et al, 2011, p 70)

Contemporary Issues

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (2012) states that one of its four major goals is to improve “Equitable and Appropriate Educational outcomes” for all Australian students. (Australian Government, 2012, p 2) This goal includes the provision for all Australian students to develop an understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, both traditional and contemporary. (Australian Government, 2012, p 2) It would be usual for a Year 5 or 6 classrooms to explore Aboriginal people as historical figures. There appears to be little consideration given to the fact that Aboriginal people are still present throughout Australia and that they are still faced with hardship in contemporary society. This situation is highlighted by many teachers referring to Aboriginal people and their culture in the past tense. (Harrison et al, 2011, p 69)

By implementing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority the Australian Curriculum (2011) is honouring the influence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures have had in Australia’s past but also acknowledges their presence and contribution within the contemporary Australian society. (Sarra, 2011, p 618)

Racism

Australia is seen as a racist country, whether or not we believe this to be true, when we consider the ways in which the Aboriginal people have been treated, this view is understandable. In the hope of changing the mistakes of the past we need to develop the knowledge and understanding of all students in regard to Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander people. This will enhance the students’ ability to positively contribute to the “ongoing development of Australia.” (ACARA, 2011, Paragraph 2)

Hart et al (2012) commented on the negative unmodern portrait of Aboriginal people. It is stated that students have commonly been taught about Aboriginal people in the sense that they are “objects to be known”, rather than people from whom we can all learn. (p 707)

Similarly, Mooney et al (2003) found that some teachers had negative and almost racist opinions in regard to Aboriginal people, believing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students received too many benefits. Particularly, in regard to “funding, teacher aides, and courses”, and that there are other children who are equally in need of these resources. (Mooney et al, 2003, p 5) Many believe these racist views and stereotypes conveyed by teachers have led to the lack of improvement for the way in which Aboriginal people are viewed and treated in Australia. (Pearson, 2011, p 189)

Ultimately, it is the way in which teachers present Aboriginal people and their perspectives that embed cultural attitudes and representations about Indigenous people within students. (Lea et al, 2011, p 266)

The implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in schools

A study into teachers’ opinions in regard to teaching Aboriginal perspectives showed that most teachers believe it is an important part of the curriculum, yet, the reason for this belief was because their school is required to, not that they felt that it was important. (Mooney et al, 2003, p 3) The same study highlighted a strong correlation between the number of Aboriginal students within a school and the importance that school placed upon the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives. (Mooney et al, 2003, p 3)

In conducting a study of NSW schools, Harrison and Greenfield (2011) found that most teachers did not “possess the knowledge to teach about Aboriginal Australia.” (Harrison et al, 2011, p 74) Many teachers admitted that they had little knowledge in
regard to how to teach Aboriginal perspectives. Those teachers, who had received an element of Aboriginal perspectives education during pre-service training, were found to be more likely to teach Aboriginal perspectives. Yet, they too believed they were underprepared to fully implement these perspectives across all areas of the curriculum. (Mooney et al, 2003, p 6)

Pearson (2011) believes that teachers who are not of Aboriginal backgrounds often only teach their students about Aboriginal stereotypes, rather than genuine Aboriginal perspectives. (p 79) It has also been suggested that people of non Aboriginal descent are unable to fully understand the Aboriginal people’s culture or connection to the land. This raises the question as to whether teachers of non-Aboriginal descent are equipped to teach Aboriginal perspectives at all.

**The involvement of indigenous communities in developing curriculum**

From as early as 1972, there have been calls for the inclusion of Aboriginal people in education planning. (McGregor, 2011, p 180) The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (2012) aims to increase the “involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Educational Decision-Making.” (Australian Government, 2012, p 1) In doing this the aim is to increase the “number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers.” (Australian Government, 2012, p 1)

Sarra (2011) suggests that the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’s “from the local or the broader community”, in the development of curriculum is essential in giving an “Indigenous perspective in an Indigenous voice” and can provide a richer learning experience for all students. (p 623)

In developing the Australian Curriculum, educators of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decent, “representatives from the Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies” and the community were consulted. (ACARA, 2011) Additionally, a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander “teachers with expertise in one” of the domains
were consulted to provide advice on how the priority could best be implemented throughout the key learning areas. (ACARA, 2011) The extent to which the indigenous community has been included in the development of this cross curricula priority has been essential in changing the way Aboriginal perspectives are taught.

Harrison and Greenfield (2011) caution that Aboriginal knowledge and culture is unique to its location. The traditions, language and learning of one location are “retold and relived” by that community and is unlike any other. (p 74) Therefore, a one size fits all approach to the implementation of this priority would not be successful as the knowledge and traditions of Aboriginal people will differ from location to location. As such, this raises the issue of generalised assessment difficulties. The difference between the intended Aboriginal perspectives and that which is interpreted or learned by teachers/students may be very different. (Harrison et al, 2011, p 74)

**Recommendations**

The implementation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum is an essential tool in continuing the reconciliation process with Aboriginal Australians. By instilling the skills and knowledge in our children to make informed decisions, we will enable greater change in future generations.

In conclusion, for the hopes of this priority to be realised the following recommendations need to be addressed.

1. *Schools need to embrace the priority.* Both the leadership team and classroom teachers need to embrace this priority and model respect and acceptance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Otherwise, students and families will believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders culture and histories are not an important part of the school or community. (Rahman, 2012, p 3)

2. *Teachers need to be educated.* Specifically, teachers need to learn how to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. There has been a trend in pre-service teacher education to focus on learning about “Indigenous peoples and their knowledge’s, rather than ‘learning from.” (Hart et al, 2012, p 717) Universities need
to react to the negative and uninformed views of many teachers and offer a specific unit which addresses this. If pre-service teachers are provided with this training they will go into their classrooms more confident about implementing Aboriginal perspectives and will be more likely to embrace it in their teaching. (Mooney et al, 2003, p 2)

3. *Ongoing teacher training and support.* In addition to pre-service teacher education, in-service teachers also need to be provided with support in terms of professional development days and in school training. (Mooney et al, 2003, p 8)

4. *Aboriginal perspectives coordinator.* The appointment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leader, even if there is one per school zone, would provide teachers with guidance and support in implementing this priority.

5. *Aboriginal people need to be involved.* The implementation of this priority needs to be done in conjunction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This will give the school knowledge and guidance in regard to the culture, language and traditions unique to the people from their specific school area. Additionally, this will allow teachers to improve the quality of their teaching through authentic Aboriginal perspectives.

6. *Schools need to explore new and innovative ways to apply Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum.* Many schools adopt Aboriginal culture days to enhance students understanding of Aboriginal knowledge. Although this type of event as stand alone activity would be insufficient, when organised in collaboration with Aboriginal people it can provide quality “learning experiences”. (Harrison et al, 2011, p 74) Especially, when used in conjunction within ongoing Aboriginal perspectives throughout the curriculum.

Ultimately, the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority will provide children with an appreciation that will lead them to have a different interpretation of our history, correct the ignorance and racism, and promote social justice within the Australian society. (Sarra, 2011, p 622)

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References


