

24 November 2020

Submission to AITSL

Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this submission, which focuses on the cultural competency of the teacher workforce. The submission is based on input from Aboriginal education officers in state and territory Catholic Education Commissions.

The NCEC is the national representative body of Australia's Catholic schools. Working closely with the state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, the NCEC's advocates for and develops policy at the national level for Australia's Catholic schools.

Australia's Catholic schools are diverse and universal in their reach, offering an education to all. There are increasing numbers of students who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in Catholic schools across Australia. Currently, there are 24,102 (3.1%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Catholic schools, which equates to an increase of 69% over the past decade.

Most of these students (64.2%) attend school in New South Wales and Queensland. Nationally, the majority (66.4%) of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic school students are educated in major cities or inner regional areas.

Culture plays an essential role in the learning of children in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is a high level of misunderstanding by non-aboriginal Australians when it comes to community and family structures which often leads to communication difficulties when dealing with the learning and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This cultural awareness needs to be fully understood before effective learning can take place. Many Catholic School authorities provide professional learning opportunities for staff to build their cultural competence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, with Brisbane Catholic Education providing two programs, Crossing Cultures - Hidden Histories and Looking Forward Looking Back, and Townsville Catholic Education offering a retreat on country as examples.

Catholic Education Northern Territory collaborates with Charles Darwin University to deliver the Growing Our Own Project. This project works with assistant teachers who would like to undertake pre-service teacher training in the school they are working at. This project has had a high success rate with local community members becoming teachers in their community school. There is an ongoing need for more local representation on school executives so that the subtleties of culture and country are holistically reflected in the mission and vision of each community school. Catholic Education Western Australia has identified the important role of Aboriginal teacher assistants (ATA) both in the learning and teaching process but also in community liaison, including with parents and the wider community. Many schools preference Aboriginal people for other roles including administrative support and general maintenance. Youth workers are also important in school-student-community connections.

Specific Comments in response to the submission

1. What does a culturally competent teaching workforce (including teachers, school leaders, and schools) look like?

School leaders and teachers who are culturally competent, respect the cultural ways of knowing and

doing, have a deep understanding of the diversity within their local Aboriginal community and honour those differences. Cultural competency is about valuing diversity for the richness and creativity it brings to society and the ability to understand, communicate and effectively interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Cultural competency entails an understanding of local cultural expectations around ceremony, lore, land, kinship/family relationships. It also entails an expectation to be familiar with local language (high-frequency words and phrases).

Cultural competency is a never-ending journey involving critical reflection of learning to understand how people perceive the world and appreciate the different systems of shared knowledge. Consultation with peak bodies is ongoing to ensure that the language teachers use is being delivered appropriately. Cultural competence is not static and our level of cultural competence changes in response to new situations, experiences and relationships.

The five elements of cultural competence are:

- attitudes
- skills
- knowledge
- respect
- consultation

To be culturally competent requires:

- a commitment by all staff to build their own cultural knowledge and understanding, making it an ongoing and deliberate commitment
- staff members engaged with the appropriate teaching and learning communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- being part of a workforce where staff know how to build strong relationships/partnerships with students, families, community
- schools are visually welcoming and locally contextualise First Nations throughout the school grounds
- an environment in which all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can see themselves and their culture reflected in their learning and development
- educators who are culturally competent, respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living and celebrate the benefits of diversity
- an ability to understand and honour differences and encourage all learners to value their cultural heritage and that of others
- seek to recognise, promote and celebrate student's cultural competence to ensure fullness of life for all in Catholic education
- teachers who challenge their personal experiences and knowledge of Aboriginal culture and their own cultural bias
- embedding cross-curriculum priorities authentically throughout the curriculum

2. What does a teacher/school leader need to be culturally competent? What will it take?

Providing support through the cultural competency training and cultural competency framework for schools is critical to ensuring schools can evaluate and consider how cultural safety could further be promoted into the broader school community.

It is critical that schools seek out and listen to Aboriginal community members and families when making decisions about the school and understand how policy and procedural changes affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families. Having authentic relationships with Elders and their local Aboriginal community is vital.

There is a need to ensure that culturally competent educators understand their own biases and patterns

of discrimination. School leaders and teachers need to understand their own cultural history and contemporary status and that of their students and their communities if they are to appreciate their students' strengths and needs fully. Cultural competence is an ongoing process that requires a commitment to continued deepening knowledge and learning of all cultural backgrounds. A key element is an awareness of unconscious bias and a belief in continuous development.

What will it take?

- commitment by all personnel to being open-minded, curious and wanting to learn
- leadership formation and education to develop teacher/ school cultural competency
- time and patience and building relationships based on trust and respect with First Nations People
- an effective self-reflection tool to identify strengths and weaknesses in cultural competence
- an ability to challenge dialogue and change attitudes
- a range of opportunities in professional learning, immersion experience and authentic relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- inviting students to share their stories and cultures and building a culture of trust to ensure that students feel safe to share and connect
- being aware that not all families have the same values and cultural beliefs even if they are from the same community.

3. What does cultural safety look like in schools?

Aboriginal cultural safety is influenced by schools supporting traditional practices, heritage and deep knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal history. This must be embedded into all school policies, NOT bolted on. Valuing the cultural beliefs of Aboriginal families and communities will lead to schools respecting the diversity of student needs. Reflecting these practices into the curriculum in partnership with the local Aboriginal community will ensure better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

A culturally safe school is an environment that visibly values and authentically presents the cultures of all students and communities and is willing to seek support to further their cultural understanding and commitment. Culturally safe schools do not challenge or deny students their cultural identity or lifestyle choices.

A culturally safe school:

- encompasses a sense of belonging to groups and communities and understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community engagement
- responds to diversity with respect of all members within the local community in a fair and just way
- is socially responsible and shows respect for the environment
- enables learners to feel safe to express their own cultural heritage and feel that their cultural heritage is respected and celebrated
- ensures that Aboriginal staff and students feel like they belong in the school and there are visible signs, symbols of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colours, images and artefacts in the school environment acknowledging culture and knowledge
- has a strong and committed staff and a strategy and plan to engage Aboriginal parents and families
- has a commitment to personal self-reflection and continual life-long and professional learning to increasing cultural awareness and competency
- has responsibility for developing racial literacy and uses inclusive language
- promotes emotional intelligence and resilience
- has the capacity for cultural self-assessment

4. What might be some of the challenges or barriers we face in developing a culturally competent teaching workforce?

Aboriginal education policies, frameworks and practices must include the voices of the Aboriginal families and community. School leaders and teachers must demonstrate an ongoing commitment to developing local cultural competence in a two-way process with families and communities. They must encourage local Aboriginal role models for cultural support for our students, recognising that this is crucial to ensuring Aboriginal students have a sense of strong cultural identity and belonging.

Schools must respect and value the community, agencies, Elders and local community protocols. Teachers need to understand and honour, the local histories, cultures, languages, traditions of Aboriginal people and value Aboriginal students' different capacities and abilities and respect differences in families' home lives. Schools must recognise and embrace that the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being contributes to the richness of each school setting.

There are many barriers to developing a culturally competent teaching workforce. Some of these include:

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of why cultural competency is necessary
- Teachers not willing to change how things are done in the classroom, lack of culturally responsive pedagogy, staff out of their 'comfort zone'
- Schools leaders who do not prioritise cultural competency or drive the changes required
- Competing school priorities
- Insufficient opportunities for genuine leadership and/or voice by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers
- The low levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher workforce
- High staff turnover in remote schools; not enough embedding, consistency, educational continuity, etc.
- Difficulty accessing local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Time - community consultation cannot be rushed
- Accessing relevant, self-reflective, professional practice available to all sectors of Education
- Prioritising training; training has to be regular, ongoing and sustained
- Preconceived judgements about reasons for poor health, low attendance and engagement, youth crime etc.
- The school community truly embracing equality - *"Equality is more than a set of beliefs that we aspire to; more than a set of standards that can be legally enforced. It is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in an organisation, enabling people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations"* (National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities).