Features: Cultural competency

By Paul Bridge, Senior Vice President
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A recent Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) discussion paper, Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce, centres on a robust discussion about the role of the teaching profession within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The paper posed the question of what will strengthen the understanding of teachers and school leaders to create maximum student learning outcomes through a holistic approach to schooling.

In its introduction, the AISTL paper acknowledges the challenges facing the teaching profession when it states that "Australian education systems were never designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students".

"The legacy of colonisation has undermined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' access to their cultures, identities, histories and languages," it states.

"As a result, they have largely not had access to a complete, relevant and responsive education.

"Australia's education system must respectfully embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with safe learning environments."

The AISTL paper reiterates what many educators who work with Indigenous students already know, which is that: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are incredibly resilient, and much like their peers, come to school with a willingness and desire to learn."

"Like all children and young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring unique gifts and aptitudes to the classroom," the paper states.

"With a strong sense of identity, curiosity, and agency, Indigenous students are eager to be guided to success.

"Throughout their learning journey, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students yearn to explore the lives, stories and histories of other Indigenous people, which will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see themselves in the ongoing story and identity of our nation's fabric.

"There is a real opportunity to ensure Australian classrooms are places where all students feel safe to develop their identities, interests and dreams.

"For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this means developing education programs with them and facilitating greater student agency.

"Teachers, school leaders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities recognise this and want to work together to ensure classrooms work for every learner.

"Cultural competency is a lifelong journey of learning, unlearning and re-learning."

Schools, in their design, construct and deliver teaching and learning for mainstream Australia.

Schools have over the years delivered a product that caters for the predominant culture and has not taken into account the diversity that exists in our nation, and the needs and aspirations of the students in which they serve.

For teachers and school leaders it also highlights that in teacher training institutions, teachers have been equipped to be proficient in teaching methodology that is suited to teaching in a Western-style of education.

This, for all intents and purposes, may have worked for the largest cohort of students in Australian schools in the past.

But this teaching approach has not catered for, and is not, reflective of the diversity that does exists in many school settings, nor does it reflect the capabilities of teachers and school leaders to be equipped with the skills to recognise and adapt their teaching approaches at classroom or whole school level.

School leaders and teachers need to be given the skills to be proficient in being culturally skilled and competent to cater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within a school setting.

University of Melbourne education senior lecturer Melitta Hogarth wrote in a recent online essay that as an educationalist working in initial teacher education, she constantly reminded student teachers that the tuition they received in Indigenous training was a starting point.

“They must make a concerted effort to continue their learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, languages, histories and cultures,” she wrote.

“I share how the course in which I teach is just as much about them and reflective practice than it is about how to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures 101.

“I share how the intention is to effect change within the system; to work towards shaping a world we can all live in.”

Dr Hogarth, a Kamilaroi woman, wrote that change could not occur until people began acknowledging how racism is embedded within institutions and systems and took decisive action to call it out.

“Schools and teachers, as well as education systems, need to begin reflecting on their actions and the baggage they carry,” she wrote.

“They need to willingly partake in honest conversations about how they interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, languages, histories and cultures.

“A culturally competent teaching workforce is possible in Australia, but it will require some intelligent self-reflection as individuals, schools, organisations and institutions address the systemic issues holding back true growth and development as a profession capable of cultural competence.”

Building a culturally competent workforce

The AITSL paper highlights that cultural competency is not about adding to increasing demands being placed on teachers but more about increasing their knowledge and dillybag of skills to broaden their teaching practices when teaching Aboriginal students.

The discussion paper also highlights that funding over many years has gone into other areas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to improve the outcomes of Aboriginal students, through a range of student support programs that specifically target the students.

Within the WA school context this has included pastoral care and support programs for boys and girls.

These are all, in their own way, important for students to support them individually on their learning pathway through K-12.

The report states: “Over many decades, national and state policies have pursued different strategies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education predominantly aimed at students. Areas such as student attendance, literacy and numeracy, community engagement, critical transition points, student retention, and school readiness have been the primary focus. Proportionally, little resourcing has been devoted to teaching and school leadership for Indigenous engagement.”

Fundamentally, AITSL, through the *Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce* paper, seeks feedback on the following:

- What does a culturally competent work force look like?
- What is needed to be culturally competent educators?
- What are the barriers/challenges in making this happen?
- What does a cultural safety look like in school?

How do we make our work as educators – as teachers in the classroom and school leaders leading schools – more reflective in our practices?

Based on this consultation and discussion with all stakeholders, the information and research identified will assist in empowering schools to be more responsive to the diversity that exists.

While it is a process that will not happen overnight, it is vital that we start taking the steps towards building culturally competent and sensitive schools in our community.

Schools that understand and have embedded practices of staff being culturally responsive and competent in their professional practices can continue doing what they have always done.

But for those schools that are grappling with what it is to be culturally responsive and competent, or imagining what it would look like, some of the key tasks to undertake include:

- Vision setting of the school.
- Whole school planning processes.
- Induction processes for staff.
- Authentic community engagement in school practices.
- Cultural protocols reflected in classroom and whole school practices.

These, and other approaches that are working and shared as part of this consultation, are just some of the instruments, artefacts and resources that will assist teachers and school leaders within schools to improve their cultural competency.

AISTL's vision for the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is that Indigenous students:

- Will be excited and motivated to go to school because their teachers encourage them through the school gate and into the classroom, ready for a day of learning. This is demonstrating high expectations.
- Feel safe and valued because their teacher acknowledges and centres what they bring to the classroom. This can only happen through applying a cultural competence lens.
- Will fully participate and contribute in the classroom and be brave and bold; they will be first to put up their hands to respond to a question or seek clarification. They will not feel shame.
- Will put their full faith and trust in their teachers, who understand and empathise about what is in their invisible backpack. Cultural competency is about teachers and school leaders knowing their students.
- Receive a quality education and will not be left behind because of cultural differences. Teachers and school leaders will step out of their comfort zone and do life with different people; it will enrich their lives.

Achieving this vision will ultimately impact on the engagement of Aboriginal families and students in school, supporting them to achieve their full potential within the education setting, which is there to serve them.

We owe this to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students if we espouse to provide quality education for all.

Be part of the change

AITSL is seeking the views of the teaching profession on how teachers and leaders across Australia can be supported to enhance their Indigenous and cultural competency. They are inviting educators to share their responses to a series of focus questions in the Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce paper via internet, email or post.

Visit bit.ly/30w7zEU for all discussion materials and more information on how to participate. Submissions will be accepted until midnight AEDT, Monday 30 November 2020.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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