

# Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce

Discussion paper

September 2020



## Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land, sea country, and water ways across Australia. We honour and pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

### About the artwork

Reko Rennie, *Untitled 2020*.

Reko Rennie is an interdisciplinary artist who explores his Aboriginal identity through contemporary media. Through his art, Rennie provokes discussion surrounding Indigenous culture and identity in contemporary urban environments. Largely autobiographical, his commanding works combine the iconography of his Kamilaroi heritage with stylistic elements of graffiti. He merges traditional diamond-shaped designs, hand-drawn symbols, and repetitive patterning to subvert romantic ideologies of Aboriginal identity.

### Disclaimers

For the purposes of this work, the working term Indigenous Cultural Competency is used consistently and is defined as the ability to understand, communicate, and effectively and sensitively interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, communities, and staff. A range of other terms have also been used to refer to this ability and AITSL welcomes an opportunity to determine language that is most useful and appropriate to the teaching profession. There is a glossary at the end of this paper to explain highlighted terms that are used throughout.

AITSL respects and celebrates the unique and diverse cultures, languages, and societies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The terms used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are used only for the purposes of this paper. The term Indigenous is used interchangeably with the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to assist readability.

AITSL was formed to provide national leadership for Commonwealth, state, and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership with funding provided by the Australian Government.

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## You're invited



On behalf of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), I invite you to contribute to the next phase of AITSL's *Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce* project.

This discussion paper (the paper) has been developed to introduce key themes and messages identified during initial consultations with the profession and community stakeholders in 2019. The paper provides an overview of the impacts, needs, and considerations of cultural competency within the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to stimulate thought and conversation.

The paper provides a detailed background to cultural competency in the Australian education context. It sets out a series of key areas for discussion and outlines how you can contribute your voice and views to this work through a submission process. The responses received from the submission process, combined with national consultation undertaken during 2020, will inform key findings and recommendations to be presented and discussed at a National Dialogue in 2021.

The National Dialogue, which will bring together teachers and a wide range of education and community experts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, will help us to collectively inform the design and development of resources and tools to better support teachers and school leaders improve their cultural competency.

The teaching workforce has a unique opportunity to be leaders in defining and enacting cultural competency in the Australian education context and, by doing so, help achieve better outcomes and opportunities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and indeed all members of the education community.

The AITSL team and I look forward to your input.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Hattie'.

**Emeritus Laureate Professor John Hattie**

September 2020

## Introduction



**3.3%**  
population

(Australian Bureau of  
Statistics, 2017)



**5.7%**  
school children

(ACARA, 2017)



**2%**  
teachers

(Australian Council of  
Deans of Education,  
2018)

### Cultural respect

Recognition, protection, and continued advancement of the inherent rights, cultures, and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Australian education systems were never designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988; Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1989). The legacy of colonisation has undermined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' access to their cultures, identities, histories, and languages. 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 (Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019).

The Mparntwe (pronounced M-ban-tua) Declaration respectfully highlights how culture is important for us all, and especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have experienced a systemic erasure of their languages and cultures. Our cultures guide our individual and collective identities and influence all aspects of our lives. The acknowledgement that teachers have an important role to play in the cultural understanding and healing occurring right now across Indigenous Australia is a guiding light in this project.

Until recently, there has been limited recognition of the incredible diversity of languages and cultural practices among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In many ways, the idea of 'cultural competency' respects and embodies the recognition of this diversity, and the celebration of the cultural resurgence that is currently underway. Cultural competency also speaks to the idea of safety, recognising that no student can learn unless they feel safe and welcome at school.

This project, *Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce*, seeks to bring the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities together to re-imagine what our shared future might look like. Addressing our internal biases and assumptions and developing a greater understanding of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges is critical to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It can improve learning outcomes, strengthen engagement, and recognises that a relationship between students and teachers built on **cultural respect** and understanding can change lives.

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. Proportionately, little resourcing has been devoted to teaching and school leadership for Indigenous engagement. This project provides an opportunity to centre the profession in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, which will strengthen the understanding and skills of teachers and school leaders, maximising student learning outcomes through a more holistic approach to schooling.

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**‘The cultural awareness, responsiveness, and competency of the current Australian teaching workforce should be advocated by the collective not driven by the individual.’**

Dr Melitta Hogarth, Assistant Dean,  
Indigenous | Melbourne Graduate  
School of Education, University of  
Melbourne

## Quick link

To learn more about the project, please refer to ‘About the work’ from [page 29](#).

Cultural competency is not about adding to the unremitting demands of teachers; it is about enhancing and enriching teacher practice and broadening the perspective of the profession. Teachers and school leaders have not always been effectively supported to teach Indigenous students, nor have they always been provided with the resources to help them develop either their skills or confidence in this area (OECD, 2017). This lack of training and resources, combined with the historical and contemporary experiences of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, has made the barriers to change seem insurmountable. This project seeks to effect long-lasting change that benefits the profession.

This will only occur by supporting teachers and school leaders and, crucially, listening to the needs and aspirations of students and their families.

At its heart, cultural competency is a celebration of learning together; it is opening new doors to greater respect for, and inclusion of, the incredible diversity of cultures and languages that continue to exist across the nation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culturally competent teachers and schools have the power and responsibility to create new and promising futures. It is a challenging task, and one that both includes and goes beyond a focus on student outcomes, but the benefit of this work—for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, families, and teachers—is immense.

Education has the potential to be a great equaliser. Australians universally value education as the key to the success of future generations, yet they recognise not everyone has the power nor equal or equitable opportunities to shape it. This project is one of those opportunities.

# A vision for a better future

**‘Future teachers, nurses, doctors, police, lawyers and politicians are in our schools today. Culturally responsive and racially literate pedagogy is essential for a more equitable tomorrow.’**

Sharon Davis | Director Education,  
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Studies

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. 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. Teachers and school leaders must truly and wholeheartedly embed themselves in the journey of cultural competence and they will find that, just like their students, they are always learning (Krakouer, 2015).

## **Our vision is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 be 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.

## **Invisible backpack**

Social and emotional factors that students carry that are not visible such as race, gender, religion, language, poverty, [sexuality, disability] and family issues that impact their learning (McIntosh, 1989).

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# Language of change

## At a glance

Former school principal and expert on unconscious bias in the American education system, Dr Tracey Benson, explains that as a principal he was unable to connect with the debate about racism in schools, because he did not have the proper language [tools] required. He also explains that without being able to define how unconscious bias occurs in schools, it is impossible to dismantle it. Tools such as the 'good' non-racist vs anti-racist binary, and intent vs impact binary allow us to define and address the problem of racism in schools. Language has the power to shift the conversation and empower teachers and school leaders to engage in new language that can help in dismantling outdated education systems that perpetuate racism.

Dr Tracey A. Benson | Assistant Professor of Education Leadership, University of North Carolina, and co-author of *Unconscious Bias in Schools* (2019)

## Unconscious bias

Attitudes and beliefs of ourselves and others that are beyond our awareness and may be reinforced by environment and experiences.

Language is an integral transmitter of culture. It is a tool that allows communities to discuss and describe ideas, and it shapes how people influence and teach others. The language and words used throughout this project, the paper, and beyond are no different. There is a unique opportunity right now to shape the language used when discussing cultural competency within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to ensure it captures the continual and transformative process of developing and enacting cultural competence.

Language and key terms have meaning beyond their textbook definitions. They can invoke emotional responses that are connected to history, people, and places. As such, a simple word can have vastly different meanings to different people. With regards to the context of this paper, this project strives to move towards language that inspires, connects, empowers, and promotes positive change and transitions away from colonial and deficit-laden language that embodies the mistakes of the past. For example, the use of the term 'achievement gap' refers to the disparity in the achievement levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Morrison et al 2019) and is considered deficit-laden language. Whereas the term 'cultural fluency' refers to the skills and compassion to both appreciate one's own culture and be fluent in at least one additional culture (Miller, 2020), offers a shift in language that is empowering and inspires change.

Language can also be a barrier and reflect our biases. Acknowledging this is crucial when discussing a sensitive issue such as racism in the Australian education system. Such discussions can provoke defensive attitudes or unintentionally cause division. To address this and encourage greater engagement from teachers and school leaders in the conversation, Dr Tracey Benson and Sarah Fiarman (2019) promote the term **unconscious bias**, which describes how we all absorb prejudices about 'race' and about diverse peoples and cultures throughout our lives, which can then influence our thoughts, actions, and relationships.

If it is accepted that language is a tool for change, then it is possible to identify the direction of that change. If used strategically, language can draw people's attention to the inequalities or inequities of the status quo.

Along with the key themes outlined in the 'areas for discussion', this paper invites you to think about the language used moving forward when talking about cultural competency. There is a clear imperative to better define cultural competency in the education context, both to describe more clearly the active principles, processes, and practices that underpin it, as well as to distinguish what cultural competency is not.

As stakeholders embarking on this journey of positive transformation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, it is important the language used embodies and inspires this change. To ensure positive transformation, language needs to empower and encourage teachers and school leaders along this journey.



## Background

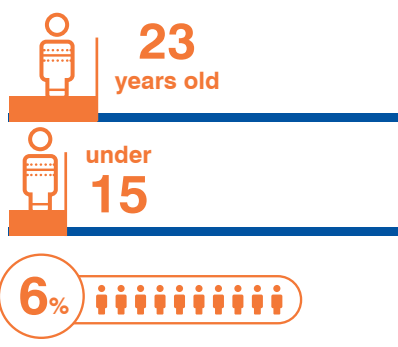
The education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is a major focus in the contemporary political agenda. In recent years, there has been an increasing expectation teachers be culturally competent; however, many teachers acknowledge this is a persistent challenge. Research regularly highlights that many teachers have limited to no preparation in teaching within culturally diverse contexts, including students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. To understand and respond to cultural diversity in the classroom, teachers and school leaders must recognise the role culture and identity plays when determining strategies to engage effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, students, families, and communities. This collective activity is what makes Indigenous education everybody's business.

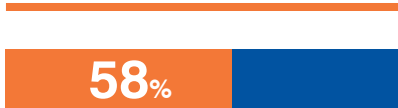
### A snapshot of the current context in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

The current context illustrates the importance of building a culturally competent teaching workforce. It highlights that one-third of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are school-aged. It draws on statistical data making explicit the need for action to address the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Further, it amplifies the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers within the Australian teaching workforce. Such data prioritises the need for the teaching workforce to reflect on their role in working towards reconciliation and improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The urgency for change is apparent in the statistical data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) reports that:

- The median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is 23 years of age.
- 34% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is under the age of 15.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up almost 6% of the total student population.





year 7 → year 12



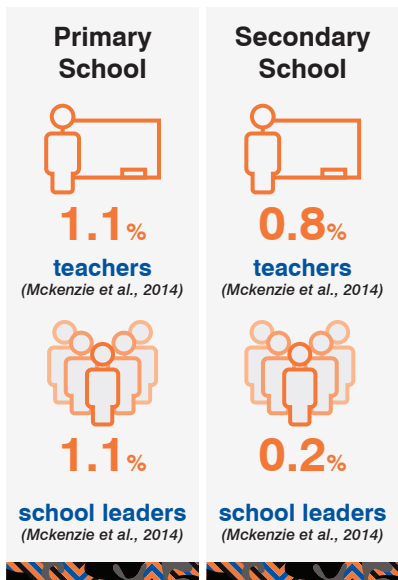
only one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over had completed Year 12



students are leaving school more frequently



decreased for all year levels and in reading and numeracy between 2008 and 2018.



The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016, 2017) makes explicit the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' educational attainment, such as:

- Only 58.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reportedly progressed from Year 7 through to Year 12 in 2019.
- In 2014–15, only one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over had completed Year 12 or equivalent.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are leaving school more frequently prior to completing Year 12.
- The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the national minimum standard decreased for all year levels and in reading and numeracy between 2008 and 2018.

*The National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (Council of Australian Governments, 2008) seeks to address these disparities by addressing attendance, literacy and numeracy, and employment. It is understood that the implementation of varying strategies to address these issues ensures the successful progression of Indigenous students through and from school to improve their potential social and economic futures (see also: Education Council, 2015, 2019). Cultural competence is one of these strategies.

Representation in schools is also important. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers within schools legitimises Indigenous knowledges within the school setting (Lowe, 2017). *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy* states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be engaged in all levels of decision-making in education (Education Council, 2015, 2019); however, data indicates that only 2% of the Australian teaching workforce is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ACDE, 2019).

Representation at executive levels within schools as principals and deputy principals is even lower. Therefore, the predominant non-Indigenous teaching workforce should develop and model lifelong learning by engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, cultures, languages, and knowledges or otherwise risk being complicit in maintaining harmful societal norms and assumptions.

Teachers need to be culturally aware, culturally responsive, and willing to critically reflect on their biases and expectations on and about Indigenous peoples to adequately ensure that the classroom environment and teacher–student relationship are conducive for all students (Macdonald, Gringart, and Gray, 2016).

## A national gaze on gaps: the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education



1814

First school for Aboriginal students established

1837

Laws passed to assert control over Aboriginal children

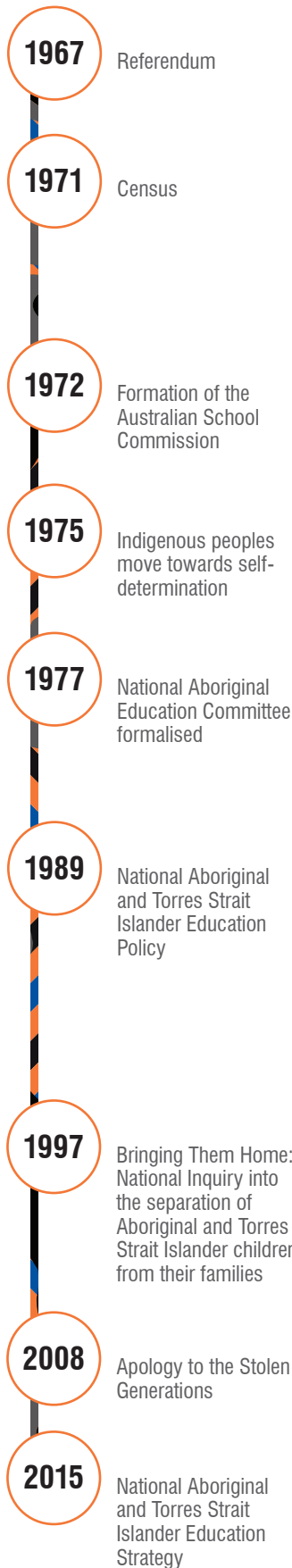
1873

Annexation of the Torres Strait Islands by Queensland

The past informs the present and knowing what has happened in the past can evoke the desire for change in the future. To develop a culturally competent teaching workforce it is necessary to examine how education provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, and cultures, has informed and continues to inform dominant practices, assumptions, biases, and stereotypes about Indigenous education. The following is a synopsis of some of the key policies and achievements. Our intent is to provide context and reasoning on how Indigenous education policy has consistently advocated for a culturally competent teaching workforce.

The first school for Aboriginal students was established by Governor Macquarie in 1814 (Price, 2019). The Parramatta Native Institution was the first of many attempts by early settlers to use education to ‘civilise’ and assimilate Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal peoples were perceived as an inferior and dying race. By 1837, the British Empire passed laws to assert control over Aboriginal children who were perceived as being open to change (Armitage, 1995). Such laws enabled the formation of the Aboriginal Protection Acts and policies of assimilation acting as the precipice for the removal of Aboriginal children from Country and family. The power and privilege afforded to the coloniser within education acted to further marginalise and dismiss the value of Indigenous knowledges. Embedded within the Australian psyche was the notion that Aboriginal peoples were uneducable and, therefore, inferior, and uncivilised. Racist ideologies held within Australian society ensured that the ‘station’ of Aboriginal peoples, ‘whether educated or not, was at the lowest rung of society’ (Hogarth, 2018). This is despite evidence that countered such a narrative.

Like Aboriginal peoples, the cultures, languages, storytelling, songs, and dances of Torres Strait Islander peoples were shared through an oral tradition. However, with the annexation of the Torres Strait Islands by Queensland in 1873, the education of Torres Strait Islander children and youth came under the Queensland government jurisdiction (Ketchell et al. 2019). Missionaries with the London Missionary Society had brought western schooling to the Torres Strait Islands with the intent to ‘civilise’ the peoples (Nakata, 2007). Focus was placed on the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. However, most notably, Torres Strait Island dialects and creole were encouraged to maintain language (Jackson-Barrett, 2011). Mission schools replaced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages by delivering all tutorage within school settings in the English language.



The achievement of the successful 1967 Referendum and its constitutional change unintentionally made explicit the disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples. That is, the 1971 Census showed the lack of access to education for Indigenous peoples (Taylor, 2017). A shift in the Australian psyche began to occur. By the mid-1970s, Indigenous children were no longer excluded from the western, euro-centric classroom (Reynolds, 2009). A shift in the approaches to Indigenous peoples became apparent whereby reports and policies specific to the educational provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth began to be introduced.

With the formation of the Australian Schools Commission in 1972, focus was placed on educational disadvantage (see for example: Schools Commission, 1975). The Commission's foresight to insist on the formation of the Aboriginal Consultative Group allowed for Indigenous voices to be heard. The collaborative report provided to government in 1975 saw Indigenous peoples move towards self-determination, informing future policy and action in addressing the disparities evident in education. The report, *Schools Commission Report for the Triennium 1976–1978* (Schools Commission, 1975), highlighted the past alienation and exclusion of Indigenous students from mainstream schools and society and raised concern about the lack of literacy skills evident. The National Aboriginal Education Committee was formalised in 1977 from members of the Aboriginal Consultative Group, and for almost 40 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices through Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies occurred (Reconciliation Australia, 2015).

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) has 21 long-term goals. This policy is still the current overarching policy in Indigenous education. It focuses on increasing Indigenous representation at all levels of decision-making in education and naturally seeks to increase the number of classroom teachers, administrators, and so forth. Notably, it recognises there is the need for community engagement and involvement to enable the appropriate teaching of Indigenous culture and languages.

The recommendations made within the *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997) led to the apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008. That year, the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Council of Australian Governments, 2008) was also endorsed, which bound governments to work towards reducing the disparity in life expectancy, health, education, and employment outcomes. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy* (Education Council, 2015) speaks to enabling opportunities for Indigenous students to achieve their full potential, sharing accountability with teachers and systems. It highlights the importance of relationships and partnerships that encourage local approaches.

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The inclusion of cultural recognition and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories, values, languages, and cultures are acknowledged and respected within each of the policies mentioned are the foundational basis on which teachers and systems enter the process of cultural competency. That is, each of the policies mentioned centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, histories, and cultures and seek teachers and systems to engage with them.

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**'In effective classrooms, the pedagogy that prevails is one where power is shared on equal terms, culture counts, learning is interactive, and dialogue far ranging.'**

Professor Russell Bishop | Maori educational expert

## Quick link

To learn more about the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers visit:

[www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards)

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## The challenges and opportunities: why we need a culturally competent teaching workforce

While acknowledging the imperative for wider systems change, increasing the cultural understanding, awareness, and competency of classroom teachers is widely recognised as one way in which to address the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) highlights that:

*Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] people generally seek education that is more responsive to the diversity of [Indigenous] circumstances and needs, and which recognises and values the cultural backgrounds of students (p. 9).*

Research highlights that such conditions would more likely increase student participation in education, which in turn would address the apparent disparities evident.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers promote reconciliation.** Australian education policy has stressed the importance of culturally responsive teachers and systems. Research asserts that culturally responsive classrooms require teachers and schools to critically reflect on and proactively seek to understand and meet the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) offers the reimagining of a culturally responsive schooling system stating that it would be inclusive of an:

*organisational climate [that] is welcoming to [Indigenous] students and their parents or guardians; [where] sensitive and skilled teachers use interesting strategies which take account of the different cultural backgrounds, socialisation experiences and living conditions of [Indigenous] students (p. 13).*

A schooling experience is dependent on the attitudes of teachers and school leaders and the willingness of these educators to reflect on themselves and their own practices and, in turn, on their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and wider members of their educational communities.

**As a teacher working in cross-cultural contexts, I must look inwardly and turn myself inside out and ask myself one question. How can I change my behaviour, my thinking, and my pedagogy to ensure students are culturally safe and have high-quality learning experiences?’**

Lisa Garrett | English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) Teacher

### **Culturally responsive pedagogy**

A framework that emphasises the need to acknowledge student differences within the context of a diverse classroom. By acknowledging these differences, teachers are asked to question what must be changed to cater and respond to student differences. A culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to be culturally competent, have high expectations while valuing students home culture and language, and have critical consciousness (Gay, 2002).

**Culturally competent systems and teachers actively and respectfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, parents, and students.** Current Indigenous education policy requires educational providers to develop and maintain relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that involve active listening and responding, accountability and engagement, collaborative information sharing, and informed decision-making (Education Council, 2015, 2019). Such aspirations are also embedded within the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (the Teacher Standards) where teachers are required to engage with parents and/or carers (see: Teacher Standards Focus Areas 7.3 and 7.4, AITSL, 2014). However, the literature reports teachers are hesitant to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, fearing to be perceived as tokenistic or making mistakes. Be brave.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers know their students and actively value their students’ cultural backgrounds.** As part of teacher practice and as articulated within the Teacher Standards, there is an expectation that classroom teachers know their students and how they learn but also, know the content and how to teach it. Educators should critically reflect on their own cultures and positions. Culturally responsive teachers seek out **culturally responsive pedagogies** to broaden their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their classrooms, develop their knowledge of Indigenous histories and cultures, and moreover, foster high-expectations relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and what they can achieve together.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers reject racial inequalities.** Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts,

*... white teachers, both pre-service and veteran, indicate that many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences. Thus, some teachers make such statements as ‘I don’t really see colour’ I just see children’ (p. 34).*

Teachers who claim ‘colour-blindness’ excuse themselves with such rhetoric of equality, dismissing students’ racial identities and in turn, maintaining racial inequalities and inequities. Culturally responsive teachers counter these perceptions by centring the students in their class using a holistic approach that acknowledges and values each student’s cultural difference (Hogarth, 2020). Culturally responsive teachers ensure a culturally inclusive classroom where all students are more likely to engage and participate but also, feel a sense of belonging and value.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers acknowledge change occurs through cultural understanding.** However, cultural awareness and understanding is not enough. Enacting cultural competency is and can be the only goal—a teaching workforce that acknowledges their own cultures and biases and seeks ways in which to engage students from all cultural backgrounds; that values the knowledges and diverse worldviews these students bring to their classrooms; and actively seeks ways to disrupt and change dominant practices. Teachers need to be risk takers and use their position of power and privilege to be agents of change.

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**The more reflective we are, the more effective we become.'**

Adrian Bell | Chair, New South Wales Secondary Principals Council  
Aboriginal Education Reference Group

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**Culturally competent systems and teachers know critical self-reflection is necessary.**

The notion of cultural competency flips the lens to the predominantly non-Indigenous teaching workforce to reflect on their knowledges and understandings, to put a critical lens on themselves and the biases and assumptions they bring to the classroom, as well as the biases and assumptions perpetuated through the wider education structures/systems that they work within. Nakata (1995) asserts:

*[r]elevance or sensitivity to 'cultural differences' alone does not change dominant practices from alienating the [Indigenous]. Changes to dominant practices, however, change dominant practices (p. 50).*

The detrimental gaps apparent between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples is a social justice issue. It is an economical issue. It is a political issue. Addressing this issue is not possible if change does not occur. Addressing this issue is only possible if teachers and the systems they work within are willing to make the necessary changes and reflect on themselves and their structures.



# Areas for discussion

Areas for discussion are derived from a detailed analysis of responses to four guiding questions used during the project's initial consultation phase:

1. What does a culturally competent teaching workforce (including teachers, school leaders and schools) look like?
2. What does a teacher/school leader need to be culturally competent? What will it take?
2. What does cultural safety look like in schools?
2. What might be some of the challenges or barriers we face in developing a culturally competent teaching workforce?

AITSL collected responses from a sample of approximately 49 stakeholder groups including AITSL's own Board of Directors, expert standing committees, and internal advisory groups via meetings, focus groups, and workshops. The sample also included education systems and sectors, state, territory and federal government agencies, Aboriginal education consultative groups, Indigenous education experts, and professional associations. Consultation was wide-ranging to capture the diversity of stakeholders that make up the education sector and community voice.

The intent of the initial consultations was to gauge the profession's current knowledge and understanding of cultural competency and its practice among the teaching profession, as well as the barriers and challenges faced in undertaking this work. AITSL analysed and unpacked the feedback and designed a set of focus questions for discussion to encourage further considerations and responses.

## How to respond

AITSL invites all interested parties to provide written submissions to the paper, particularly in response to the ideas and questions set out 'for discussion'. Respondents are welcome to address all the focus questions or only those of relevance or interest.

We also welcome examples of strong or good practice and processes to support your submission.

We also invite you to consider 'language for change' and how to better define cultural competency in the education context; to more clearly describe the active principles, processes, and practices that underpin it, as well as to distinguish what cultural competency is not.

AITSL will publish submissions on our website at the conclusion of the consultation process. AITSL will not publish submissions marked 'confidential'.

## At a glance



Deb Barry is a non-Indigenous teacher working in collaboration with other school staff, to improve practice in a range of learning areas to embed Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum. Deb works with Year Four students in challenging colonial narratives and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The school takes a multidisciplinary approach, and students can connect to Indigenous cultures and histories through science, art, reading, and history. Students are encouraged to be more inclusive and exercise critical thinking, thus connecting, and preparing them for contemporary Australian life. The school recognises the importance of embedding Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum and a successful measure is the integration of Indigenous reading resources into literacy teaching and learning programs across the school. Teachers also develop a new appreciation for the priority of Indigenous education, raising its profile with staff.

Teacher | Padbury Catholic Primary School, Western Australia

### Anti-racism

Opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance.

**‘Growing in cultural competency is stepping out of your comfort zone to do life with different people.’**

Rann Miller | Former teacher, freelance writer, and published author

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

A predominant theme arising from the consultations was a strong sense that cultural competency needs to be better defined through an education context. For example, in a health context, cultural competence is seen as ‘having the capacity to improve the health status by integrating culture into a clinical context to maximise gains from a health intervention’ (RACP, 2004). In that context, understanding relevant cultural factors of a patient, both physical and social, and how that contributes to their health and influences their diagnoses is vital. When translating this understanding to an educational context, it is important to understand the contributing factors that impact engagement and achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, such as a focus on culture and language, curriculum and pedagogy, rural and remote education, and **anti-racism** in schools.

To build a culturally competent teaching workforce, feedback from stakeholders articulated the need for inspirational leadership, relevant professional development, exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and culturally responsive pedagogies, and experiential learning opportunities to deliver quality learning experiences to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A key message throughout the consultation process was the need to embed and normalise cultural competency as common practice in all schools, for example, through whole-of-school plans, school improvement agendas, management and operational frameworks and practices, vision statements, inductions, and enrolment processes.

Teachers and school leaders need to challenge their own beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes and critically reflect on how they contribute to the valuing of diversity and understanding the dynamics of difference. Cultural competence does not occur after a single day of training or the completion of an online course. Educators become more culturally competent over time and the approach needs to be centred on continuous learning. Teachers felt they need to be able to self-assess as to where they sit along a continuum of cultural competence and identify strategies to move them through the continuum.

Real investment through appropriate funding to support evidence-based professional learning on Indigenous cultural competency is also critical. Professional learning must be contextualised and localised to ensure that teachers develop a deeper understanding that will see greater impact including pedagogical change, shifting of power dynamics in the classroom, and developing cultural safety. Professional learning must provide transferable, tangible ideas and practical tools to improve practice.

**'The issue faced predominantly in the Torres Strait is attracting quality teachers in our schools and retaining them. The complexity of our unique context demands a tailored approach to ensure that the needs and aspirations of our students and communities are met. A significant part of the answer would be to cultivate our own teachers and leaders.'**

Ned David | Chair, Torres Strait  
Islander Regional Education Council

The curriculum plays a vital role in ensuring success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The cultural competency of teachers supports, and is supported by, a culturally responsive pedagogy. Part of this is the ability to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and ways of learning authentically and respectfully into the curriculum. This enables both teachers and all their students to learn about, acknowledge, and respect the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and in turn, increase their cultural competence.

A strengths-based approach—teaching to and through students' strengths—was also a key theme. Visions of success are different for every child. Establishing high-expectations relationships; maintaining anti-deficit thinking, language, and actions; and acknowledging the journey of each child demonstrates to a student they are valued. Consequently, students are more likely to feel proud and be more confident of who they are and where they come from. Teachers should be responsible for supporting Indigenous students to become leaders of culture in the classroom. Valuing the knowledge children and their families bring with them will facilitate the creation of learning environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can thrive.

There is a real concern the current diversity of the teaching workforce does not reflect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learner. Students need to see their own cultures reflected in the adults responsible for their learning. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly underrepresented in schools, making up only 2% (ACDE, 2019) of the Australian teaching workforce.


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## For discussion

### Teachers and school leaders

- How can cultural competency be defined in an education context, both to more clearly describe the active principles, processes, and practices that underpin it, as well as to distinguish what cultural competency is not?
- Implementing school improvement agendas, developing operation plans, as well as induction and enrolment processes are complex challenges. With the focus on strengthening cultural competency, how could we develop a process of change, both systemically and at a school level, that would address these complex challenges and ultimately support the development of a culturally competent teaching workforce?
- How can strategic conversations and activities be initiated and encouraged within school communities, so they lead to the development of a culturally competent teaching workforce that is locally contextualised? Provide examples of where this work has been done successfully.
- What evidenced-based practices are needed at a systems, school, and classroom level to support teachers and school leaders to effect change so there is a whole-of-school approach to the development of culturally responsive and safe teaching and learning environments?

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

- How can schools initiate and encourage strategic conversations and activities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities beyond the school gate to develop a culturally competent teaching workforce that is locally contextualised?
  - How can we promote education as a viable and critical profession for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
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## At a glance



Blackmans Bay Primary School is a small primary school of 285 students, 25 of whom identify as Aboriginal. Twenty of these are from the Palawa and Pakana Nations of Tasmania. The focus on ensuring all teachers develop Indigenous cultural competency began seven and a half years ago through collaboration with the local community, targeted professional learning, and access to the Department of Education's Aboriginal Sharers of Knowledge Program. The Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) staff member with Aboriginal heritage, strong connections to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community and many years of leadership experience in this area led the project. The AST was fully supported by the principal and school leadership team. As highlighted by What Works and Dare to Lead projects, successful culturally competent schools start with strong leadership. The AST and the team believe the Standards provide an excellent framework to invite teachers to identify their professional learning needs towards Indigenous cultural competency.

Blackmans Bay Primary School,  
Tasmania

### Racial literacy

Racial literacy, also known as racial consciousness, refers to an individual's deeper awareness and understanding of race.

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

Feedback from stakeholders consistently acknowledged cultural competency is a continual developmental process in which personal assumptions, attitudes and attributes, cultural knowledge, **racial literacy**, systems literacy, and pedagogical skills are critical elements.

A strong sense of one's own identity, awareness of cultural societal norms, an ability to communicate sensitively, and knowledge of the beliefs and values of other cultures were also identified as being critical to cultural competence. A teacher's or school leader's ability to understand and show awareness of their students and the social factors contributing to their educational experience was key to being culturally competent.

There are myriad evidence-based strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young peoples; however, when evaluating material for use, discerning the quality of available resources was a key challenge many teachers face. They expressed a genuine fear or apprehension of delivering Indigenous content, including an assumption to teach culture, and engagement with the local community. Teachers also feared being perceived as culturally insensitive because they don't know what they don't know. Opportunities for cultural and personal reflexivity would allow teachers and students to work together to improve educational outcomes.

A common question raised by teachers during the consultation was the requirement to be culturally competent without the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their classrooms. Teachers have a professional responsibility to deliver the requirements of the Standards to demonstrate appropriate levels of professional knowledge, practice, and engagement. In addition to these standards is the national commitment to provide all Australian students with an understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures (DEET, 1989). Teachers are also responsible for delivering the cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority provides an opportunity for all young Australians to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, knowledge traditions, and holistic world views (ACARA, 2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is both for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Price, 2019).

School leadership plays a critical role in determining a narrative in schools that inspires self-reflection on individual bias, the historical legacy of colonisation, and cultural hegemony in Australia. For this to occur, teachers must have support mechanisms to allow personal growth, to develop strategies to interrupt negative and incorrect assumptions of Indigenous students and communities, and the capacity to acknowledge they can let go of the perception of being the expert and recognise the expert status of the learner. School and system leaders must be supported to persist with what makes a difference to student outcomes.

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**'We are all influenced by bias. Let's have the courage to face this and help reduce the effects of this bias on students. Let's not hide our blind spots but help each other see and address them. Let's be brave together.'**

Dr Tracey A. Benson | Assistant Professor of Education Leadership, University of North Carolina, and Former Principal

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Schools should be encouraged to have challenging conversations that are fundamentally about race and equity in their classrooms. It is about building emotional intelligence and resilience to engage in these conversations. This can only contribute positively to improving the development of culturally responsive members of society. When teachers strive towards equity in their classroom, all students will feel welcome, safe, and a sense of belonging.

Teaching is a vocation that demands much of teachers politically, intellectually, morally, and emotionally. Cultural competency is not about adding to the demands of teachers; it is about providing opportunities to enhance and strengthen teacher practice and broaden the perspective of the profession. The skill of cultural competence is not only necessary for educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students but is also necessary to navigate a globalised world. Teachers and school leaders need to have the skills and abilities to not only be culturally aware and sensitive, but also be able to bridge cultural differences in ever-shifting demographics.

## For discussion

### Teachers and school leaders

- How can teachers support students to develop knowledge of and pride in themselves and others who are different from them? What steps should all teachers and school leaders take to develop an understanding and knowledge of the diverse histories and cultural backgrounds of students?
- What types of professional learning opportunities are required to encourage teachers and/or school leaders to take risks and challenge their existing attitudes, values, and beliefs to impact change? Do they exist, and/or how might they exist?
- What types of teaching resources and activities are required to support teachers to facilitate culturally responsive learning environments and experiences?
- How might teachers use a self-reflection tool to evaluate their cultural competency to inform and inspire their next steps in their cultural competency journey? How could schools meaningfully embed such a tool into their professional learning agendas?

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

- What are the key qualities, strengths, and indicators you look for when describing a culturally competent teacher or school leader?
- What advice would you give to a teacher or school leader on ways to engage the local community in developing a school environment that is culturally responsive?
- What knowledge and understanding does a teacher need to create learning environments that are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, histories, and cultures?

## At a glance



When reflecting on what has influenced the development of cultural competency of staff at Heatley State School in North Queensland, Principal Louise Wilkinson does not point to a quick fix to make the school the place it is today for all students, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Rather, she likens it to the process required for reconciliation in Australia. It is slow, hard, but rewarding work and must be built on trusting, respectful, and accepting relationships. The key to the achievements at Heatley State School has been the strong professional working relationship forged between herself and the school's Community Education Counsellor (Indigenous support staff). They have shared a responsibility to lead and influence their staff to make a difference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through co-facilitating regular professional development focused on building cultural capability and involving key local elders and community members. Despite the setbacks and challenges, the achievements far outweigh any disappointments.

Louise Wilkinson | Principal, Heatley State School, North Queensland

### Cultural safety

An environment that is spiritually, socially, and emotionally safe as well as physically safe for students; where there is no assault challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are, and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge, and experience of learning together (Williams, 1999).

## 3: What does cultural safety look like in schools?

During consultations, cultural safety was not a familiar term and was commonly associated with bullying and harassment in schools. The term **cultural safety**, in this context, is the provision of a learning environment conducive to the diverse learning needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and where the students' cultures and identities are visible, centred, and valued.

Cultural safety centres on the experience of the student, while cultural competency centres on the capacity of the educator to provide a learning environment that meets the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Ensuring cultural safety involves challenging current stereotypes and assumptions by self-reflection. This also involves understanding cultural sensitivities and protocols through engaging with the local community and ensuring authentic input to gain an understanding of the local context. Errors and trust should be used as opportunities to learn and gain an understanding of the factors that contribute to learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Schools build cultural safety by engaging in a range of practices that acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. For example, schools perceived to be culturally safe embed appropriate enrolment processes that support parents and families to feel safe in identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. They have culturally appropriate student support structures (e.g. Koorie Education Support Officers, Advanced Skills Teachers, or Community Engagement Counsellors) in place. They acknowledge key events that celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and practice Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country where appropriate. Other strategies, such as respectfully displaying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material and using educational resources in classrooms, developing and implementing a Reconciliation Action Plan, and, where appropriate, naming buildings or programs to reflect the local community, create visibility and pride in the school and contribute to a culturally safe environment.

The importance of school–community collaboration was also a common theme raised when considering cultural safety. Collaboration is an essential component for building trust between the school and the community and is a key element to learning about students and their families. It also empowers the community to engage with the school to contribute and participate in their children's learning. Many community members have had negative experiences with education and struggle with engaging inside the school gate. Strategies that occur outside of the school gate, that meet the needs and aspirations of the community, are key to successful school–community collaboration.



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**'As educators we have a clear choice: we can embrace our professional standards, neuroscience and culturally safe practice models to nurture growth in our increasingly diverse student populations, or we can cling to systems and pedagogies that isolate and exclude our students in culturally unsafe classrooms.'**

David Vadiveloo and Rachel Edwardson | Cultural Safety Consultants

A culturally safe school will at a minimum:

- acknowledge and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures through presentation and representation
- have a strong capacity to build mutually trusting and respectful collaboration with the local community
- understand and respond to the individual needs of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and these students' wider families and communities
- ensure the teaching and learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is a strong focus in strategic planning
- set high expectations and provide leadership opportunities
- promote a shared understanding and anti-deficit and anti-racist thinking
- engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.


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## For discussion

### Teachers and school leaders

- What does a culturally safe school look/sound/feel like in your context? Provide examples of how cultural safety is evident in your practice, classroom, school, or the broader education system.
- What resources, processes, and attributes do teachers and school leaders require to support them through the process of developing a culturally safe school?
- What are the critical principles and processes a school needs to understand, develop, and maintain to meaningfully collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to foster culturally responsive teaching and culturally safe learning environments?
- What has worked to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities with an active voice in developing and/or delivering strategies to support the education of their children, and to support cultural safety in the classroom, around the school, and with the community? Provide examples.
- Are there opportunities to collaborate with the local community that could deliver more effective styles of education?

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

- What does a culturally safe school look/sound/feel like in your context?
  - What are the key considerations a school needs to understand, develop, and maintain to ensure meaningful collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to create a culturally safe school?
  - What has worked to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities with an active voice in developing and/or delivering strategies to support the education of your children, and to support cultural safety in the classroom, around the school, and with your local community? Provide examples.
  - What are the key ingredients teachers and school leaders need to establish strong collaborative relationships with your local community?
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**'It wasn't until I acknowledged my white privilege that I was able to break down the assumptions I had about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This revelation saddened me. From that point on, I have dedicated my professional and personal life to work in partnership with students and their families. I listen to their histories and aspirations. We then work together with clear and focused purpose to create the learning environments where their children can thrive.'**

Rachel Elphick | Educator

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

Teachers raised a variety of challenges and barriers to the development of cultural competency including time to plan and prepare, fear of offending, lack of knowledge, competing priorities, and resistance from other staff.

While many teachers have good intentions, a misalignment with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols and priorities can create more problems than they seek to solve. Teachers feel guilty and are paralysed by a fear of offending, which is stifling the delivery of Indigenous content. While there is a wealth of resources available for teachers to support the facilitation of learning experiences based on Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives, many find it difficult to discern which are quality resources. Teachers also find it difficult to gain access to the local Indigenous community and can be unsure with whom to connect.

Teachers identified school leaders as a barrier to the development of a culturally competent teaching workforce, particularly when leaders do not prioritise cultural competency or drive the changes required. A lack of support from school leadership means cultural competency is not seen as a shared responsibility by all teachers and allows resistance from other staff to continue unchecked. Teachers in schools with little to no Indigenous students are particularly challenged by this resistance and apathy.

Teachers identified several other challenges and barriers to actions that would support the development of cultural competency. Teachers noted the development of cultural competence requires a collective effort and have experienced a general unwillingness across the teaching workforce to embrace vulnerability and feel uncomfortable. Many teachers avoid the issue and are unwilling to change or learn. For teachers who are willing to grow and learn, there is a lack of specific, self-reflective, practical professional development to support their growth.

These concerns also extend to the system level where there is a lack of support for developing a culturally competent teaching workforce. In particular, the necessary targeted funding for Indigenous education has not been appropriately allocated to support the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. More broadly, there has been a lack of confidence and development of cultural competency at the system level. This lack of support, including ongoing funding commitments, prioritisation, and development of this work, has meant sustainable change has been difficult to achieve.

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## Quick link

To learn more about ACARA's cross-curriculum priorities, visit:

[www.acara.edu.au](http://www.acara.edu.au)

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A common theme raised throughout consultation was the importance of developing cultural competency within initial teacher education (ITE). In several institutions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is optional in ITE programs and does not model the imperative to respectfully embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures across all subject/learning areas, as is mandated in ACARA's cross-curriculum priorities. Graduates are required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the competencies and issues outlined in the Teacher Standards to gain provisional registration as a teacher in Australia. Additional support is required to ensure ITE students are comprehensively prepared, and graduate from their program meeting Graduate Teacher Standards 1.4 and 2.4 and understanding their interrelationship with the wider Standards, such as 6.2.

Similarly, stakeholders highlighted the need to support ITE students to engage in deep, reflective practice rather than just relying on the curriculum to facilitate the development of cultural competency. Providing ITE students with the requisite knowledge, skills, and understandings, which form the foundations of cultural competency, ensures the next generation of teachers are confident and well equipped to teach to and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## For discussion

### Teachers and school leaders

- How do teachers and school leaders combat and resist the negative assumptions and representations society has put on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families/communities?
- What measures should teachers and school leaders take to manage and respond effectively to the challenges they face in their roles in developing cultural competence? What measures should be taken at the systems level to address these challenges? Provide examples of where this work has been successful.
- How will teachers know if they are developing their cultural competence? What tools/resources have been used effectively in your context to evaluate, articulate, and communicate a teachers' cultural competency journey?

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

- What are some of the challenges or barriers you have experienced when collaborating and communicating with your local school?
- How were they resolved or improved?
- How can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices be a part of the establishment, development, and evaluation processes of a school's cultural competency journey?

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## Other considerations

AITSL acknowledges there are many factors that contribute to the development of a culturally competent teaching workforce. This section looks at the issues that were strongly and consistently identified through the consultation process as areas requiring improvement or reform but sit outside the scope of this work and AITSL's remit. These areas are key factors in developing cultural competency. AITSL acknowledges these areas must be addressed to achieve cultural competency and part of the teaching and learning process.

### Curriculum and content

The Australian Curriculum plays a critical part in ensuring success for Indigenous students, especially the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. The implementation of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see themselves, their identities, and cultures reflected in what they are learning and thus increases cultural competence.

However, throughout the consultation process, it was identified that the current implementation of the Australian Curriculum and the Indigenous content choices made by teachers were not ideal in addressing the inequity and achievement gaps. While this is out of scope, it is important to recognise the implementation of the Australian Curriculum still requires further exploration and discussion on how to better develop and deliver on all areas of the curriculum in a holistic way, through the lens of a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Also warranting further exploration and discussion is how both the curriculum teachers are expected to deliver, and the ITE curricula they are trained within, can best support teachers' relationships with Indigenous knowledges, and their ability to draw relationships between knowledge systems.

### Initial teacher education

As outlined in the 'areas of discussion', the importance of developing cultural competency within ITE was a consistent response during the consultations. Teachers acknowledged that, without the establishment of strong foundations in their pedagogical practice, there was a tendency to revert to methodologies and beliefs embedded during their teacher education. It is critical that ITE programs prepare teachers for the wide range of students they may teach, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In several tertiary institutions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is not a mandatory area of study in ITE programs. In institutions that do offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the base requirement is limited across the whole ITE program and does not adequately meet the students' needs. That is, stakeholders voiced serious concerns this undertaking was not enough to prepare teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and perspectives across all subject areas, in alignment with ACARA's cross-curriculum priorities.

Although this is not a key focus of the work, the mandating of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Australian teacher education is fundamental to cultural competency as it ensures all Australian students can be taught about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures by teachers who are themselves adequately educated. It is critical that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies are core areas of course outlines and appropriate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are incorporated in pre-service, postgraduate, and in-service teacher education programs.

## About the work

AITSL provides national leadership in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership and is committed to the key principles of equity and excellence in the education of all young Australians to cultivate successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed members of society.

In February 2019, the Federal Minister for Education, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, requested AITSL undertake a four-year project to *support the improved cultural competency of teachers*. The Australian Government acknowledges the importance of ensuring schools are culturally safe learning and working environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers, school leaders, and staff. This is critical to improving opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and retaining and building the Indigenous teaching workforce.

AITSL too acknowledges and values the importance of creating supportive and safe teaching and learning environments that are conducive to the diverse learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. From a teaching and learning perspective, a culturally competent workforce that meets the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities lies at the heart of this and will ultimately benefit all students and the wider education community. One of AITSL's guiding principles is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to be understood, respected, and supported in all actions undertaken by AITSL.

### Focus of the work: understanding cultural competency and using resources

This project will have a specific focus on the processes teachers and school leaders can embark on to critically understand, continually develop, and effectively enact their cultural competency. It also aims to provide teachers and school leaders with guidance on the use of relevant resources and tools to help them improve or enhance their pedagogical practice in culturally responsive ways. The development of these resources and tools will augment AITSL's existing collection of evidence-informed products to assist teachers and school leaders to improve their practice, many of which have been incorporated into system and sector professional learning programs and opportunities.

The project also seeks to develop a nationally consistent definition and language of cultural competency in the Australian education context, all the while acknowledging the interrelationship between the education context and a range of other (health, welfare, justice etc.) contexts. It aims to leverage the value of a national approach while acknowledging the high-quality approaches that are already underway, and in many cases, well embedded in some jurisdictional systems and sectors. Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander geo-cultural communities across the nation, so too will the project acknowledge the importance of localised, place-based pedagogies and practices.

AITSL will consult widely with the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on the co-design and development of a suite of resources and tools aimed at improving cultural competency in the education context. This project is a critical component of improving opportunities and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and retaining and building the Indigenous teaching workforce led by the teaching profession.

National consultation, including guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, will inform the design and development of these resources and tools, through online and face-to-face consultations, focus groups, and workshops. Applicable to varying educational contexts, they will be evidenced-based and informed by good practice. They will also be aligned to the Standards, which stipulate what teachers should know and be able to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories.

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A further focus of the work is to increase the understanding of cultural safety in Australian schools by developing supportive teaching and learning environments that are conducive to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers, ancillary staff, families, and communities. Culturally safe practices ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and their presence are actively sought.

AITSL also acknowledges this project is focusing on a vital but small part of the Indigenous education agenda, and while this current project does not address every factor relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, AITSL understands and recognises the broader agenda and continues to support and position itself to respond accordingly.

## Initial consultations

From August to December 2019, AITSL consulted with a range of stakeholders seeking feedback on AITSL's proposed approach for the project. AITSL posed four guiding questions to gauge the profession's current knowledge and understanding of cultural competency and its practice among the teaching workforce, as well as the barriers faced in undertaking this work.

AITSL conducted initial consultation in all states and territories with systems and sectors, state and federal government agencies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education consultative groups, Indigenous education experts, and professional associations. Consultation aimed to capture the diversity of stakeholders that make up the teaching profession. AITSL also engaged with its Board, internal advisory groups, and expert standing committees.

The initial consultation indicated strong support for a collective effort to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through building a culturally competent teaching workforce. It was clear that to achieve the maximum impact, generating national consistency and collaboration around cultural competency would allow common objectives to be met and measured.

The initial consultation also provided a way to better understand the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Through these consultations, stakeholders acknowledged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people place a high value on relationships. Relationships are of primary importance in Indigenous cultures and societies and are one of the key factors in effecting positive change. The valuing and understanding of culture, history, identity, and language lie at the core of these relationships.

## Research

AITSL used a range of research methods to inform this project, including an extensive desktop literature review conducted during Phase 1. The literature review formed a foundation and rationale for cultural competency in the Australian education context. A thorough review of all jurisdictional policies and strategies to summarise relevant bodies of work currently underway or already embedded formed a key part of this process.

This process highlighted a range of key issues and gaps in the literature that required further investigation and analysis to situate the issues and continue an ongoing line of enquiry. This required a greater level of expertise and access to resources to develop a comprehensive understanding of cultural competency within the Australian educational context.

AITSL commissioned the College of Indigenous Futures Arts and Society within Charles Darwin University (CDU) to develop a research paper to better understand the current context of cultural competency within the Australian education landscape. CDU conducted a thorough literature review of cultural competence, including the review of validated tools used to measure cultural competence within the Australian educational contexts, with a focus on the assessment methods and their findings.

The objective of the research was to extract international and Australian research on cultural competency, with a focus on teachers, educators, and school leaders in Australia, as well as other sectors. The key findings from the research align with the current thinking of the profession around cultural competency.



## Research key findings

- Cultural competency is a complex and multi-faceted construct and varies according to context. Different contexts require differing levels of competency. For example: urban, rural, and remote environments; a teacher's or school leader's career stage; the system level.
- Cultural competency requires contextualisation and definition in an educational context.
- Cultural competence is continually developed, not innate, and is a transformative process requiring individual investment and engagement over time.
- Cultural competence is demonstrated and observable.
- Cultural competence goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and awareness and is expressed through behaviours and attitudes.
- Cultural competence requires an individual to have the capacity to self-assess/reflect.
- Cultural competency is best understood as a process that exists on a continuum.
- A capability framework supports teachers and school leaders to move through a continuum highlighting core capabilities (knowledge, practice, and engagement) for the effective teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Cultural competence must exist at several levels—systemic (policies and procedures), organisational (skills and resources), professional (education and professional learning), and individual (knowledge, attitudes and behaviours)—enabled through four key inter-related dimensions (Universities Australia, 2011).
- Cultural competence is an opportunity to understand and recognise Indigenous educational leadership and formalise this recognition within the Standards.
- There is a divergence of views as to whether cultural competency can be achieved as an 'end state', or whether it is a continual process of learning and reflection, thus requiring a different terminology.
- Racism, and racialised attitudes and assumptions, are key concepts that need to be explored in developing cultural competence. This is often missing or unspoken in solutions towards strengthening cultural competence.
- Relational dynamic interaction is key to developing and enacting cultural competency (Gopalkrishna, 2014).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play an active and critical role in the development of cultural competency within education.
- There are limited, validated cultural competency tools freely available (online) for use in Australian educational contexts.
- Relevant existing tools have common characteristics that may make them adaptable and appropriate to Australian educational contexts.

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## Advisory Group for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

The AITSL Advisory Group for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education (AGATSIE) is a collaboration of experts from across Australia bringing the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities into the planning, design, delivery, and evaluation of the programs and initiatives AITSL delivers to teachers and school leaders across Australia (Table 1). AGATSIE provides culturally appropriate advice to AITSL and guides consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

This group has been critical in guiding and informing the work to ensure all aspects of planning and execution are culturally responsive and meet the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities. Additionally, a separate panel of academics, teachers, and education experts informed the development of this paper.

**Table 1: Advisory Group Membership**

Member	Position
<b>Renez Lammon (Co-Chair)</b>	AITSL Board Observer
<b>Carly Jia (Co-Chair)</b>	Senior Advisor, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education (AITSL)
<b>Dyonne Anderson</b>	Chair, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA)
<b>Sharon Davis</b>	Director Education, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)
<b>Judith Ketchell</b>	Executive Principal, Tagai State College
<b>Dr Jessa Rogers</b>	Honorary Senior Lecturer, Department of Indigenous Studies, MQ and Adjunct Research Fellow, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, ANU
<b>Geraldine Atkinson</b>	Former member and President, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI)
<b>Joe Sambono</b>	Former member and Curriculum Specialist, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

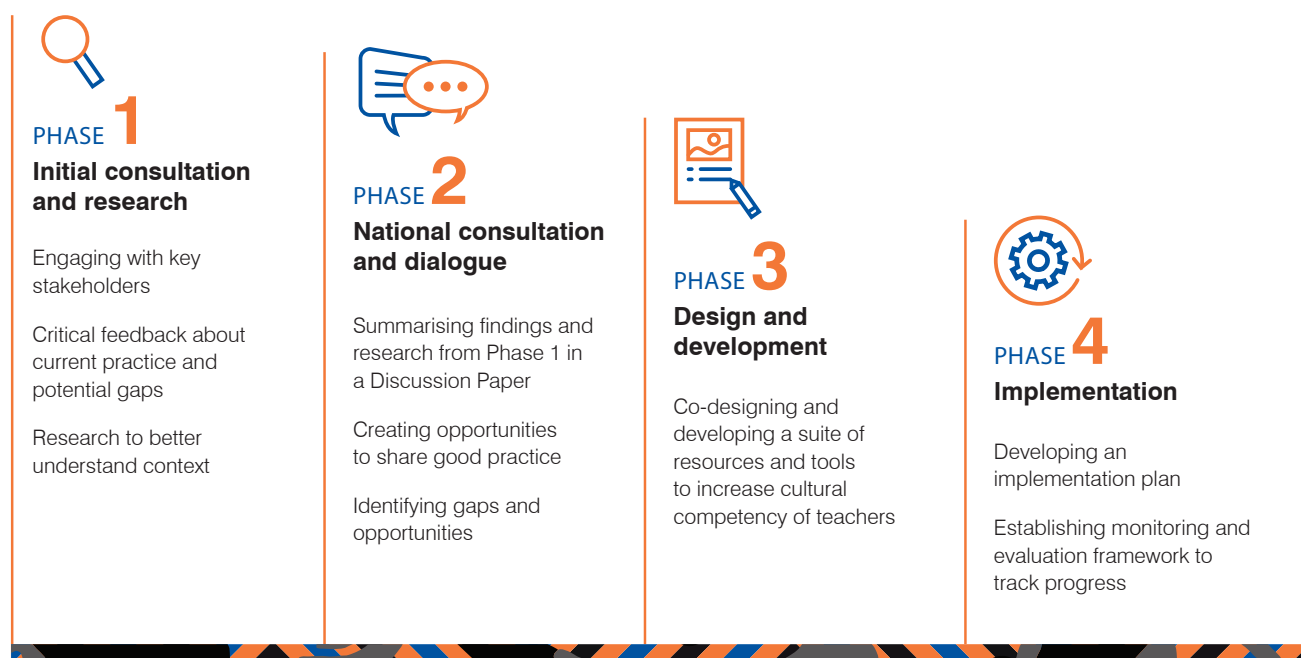
## Timeline and next steps

AITSL completed Phase 1 of the project, undertaking initial consultations and research in early 2020. Phase 1 identified the profession's current knowledge and understanding of cultural competency and its practice among the teaching workforce, as well as the barriers faced in undertaking this work.

Work in Phase 2 commenced with the development of this paper to undertake further consultation to seek wide-ranging views with education and community experts, including extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Phases 3 and 4 will be informed by Phase 2 and will focus on the process of design, development, and implementation of a suite of tools and resources for teachers. These strategies will be announced in 2021

**Figure 1:** Phases of the Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce project



During Phase 2, online submissions will open in September 2020 and will close in November 2020. Online consultations with a range of key stakeholders will take place during the second half of 2020. In early 2021, face-to-face consultations will occur with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (dependent on COVID-19 restrictions).

Following that, a National Dialogue will be convened in early 2021, bringing together a wide range of education and community experts, and other key stakeholders. AITSL will present the findings of the submissions, online consultations, and feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The purpose of the National Dialogue will be to seek agreement on a roadmap towards the development of resources and tools to support teachers and school leaders to develop their cultural competency. AITSL will consult further once recommendations and the roadmap are developed.

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# How to contribute

AITSL invites all stakeholders in education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs to contribute via online submission. AITSL will accept submissions from September to 30 November 2020.

During and after this time, AITSL will continue to consult widely through a combination of targeted and broad strategies, including online consultation with key stakeholders in each jurisdiction and focus-group discussions with teachers, principals, students, and families. We hope face-to-face consultation with Aboriginal and Torres

## Instructions for submissions

AITSL invites written submissions responding to the questions 'for discussion' (pages 15–27). Respondents are welcome to address all high-level questions or only those of relevance or interest. You may wish to provide examples of good practice or processes in your submission.

Each submission is limited to 3,000 words, including a 300-word summary of the key points provided at the start of the submission.

AITSL will publish submissions on our website at the conclusion of the consultation process. We will not publish submissions marked 'confidential'.

## Submitting a response

To submit a response to the discussion paper:



**Upload your online submission here**

<http://www.aitsl.edu.au/indigenous-cultural-competency>



**Email your submission**

[indigenoussc@aitsl.edu.au](mailto:indigenoussc@aitsl.edu.au)

AITSL will accept submissions until midnight AEDT Monday 30 November 2020.

# Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
<b>Anti-racism</b>	Opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance.
<b>Cultural awareness</b>	Recognising the differences and similarities between cultural groups.
<b>Cultural competency</b>	When organisations and individuals accept and respect cultural differences, continue self-assessment of cultural awareness, pay careful attention to the dynamics of cultural differences, and continually expand their cultural knowledge and resources in order to better meet the needs of minority populations (Cross et al. 1989).
<b>Cultural fluency</b>	Refers to the skills and compassion to both appreciate one's own culture and be fluent in at least one additional culture (Miller, 2020).
<b>Cultural humility</b>	A process requiring a humble and respectful attitude towards individuals of other cultures. It requires self-reflection and introspection to work towards realising our cultural bias and acknowledgement that one cannot know everything about a specific culture. Cultural humility also acknowledges learning about cultures is a life-long process (Tervalon and Murray Garcia, 1998).
<b>Cultural integrity</b>	When schools demonstrate both respect and high regard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, knowledge systems, and languages; welcome and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and local community members; and meet the learning needs and aspirations of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
<b>Cultural respect</b>	Recognition, protection, and continued advancement of the inherent rights, cultures, and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
<b>Culturally responsive pedagogy</b>	A framework that emphasises the need to acknowledge student differences within the context of a diverse classroom. By acknowledging these differences, teachers are asked to question what must be changed to cater and respond to student differences. A culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to be culturally competent, have high expectations while valuing students' home culture and language, and have critical consciousness (Gay, 2002).
<b>Cultural responsiveness</b>	Cultural responsiveness requires individuals to be culturally competent. This competency is having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. Culturally responsive teachers continuously support minoritised students through examination of their own assumptions about race and culture (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis, 2016).

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Term	Definition
<b>Cultural safety</b>	An environment that is spiritually, socially, and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for students; where there is no assault challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are, and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge, and experience of learning together (Williams, 1999).
<b>Cultural sensitivity</b>	Being aware that cultural differences and similarities between students exist without assigning them a value. When you practise cultural sensitivity, you need to be willing to adapt your communication and behaviours to other cultural norms. The result is empathy instead of judgement.
<b>Invisible backpack</b>	Social and emotional factors students carry that are not visible such as race, gender, religion, language, poverty, [sexuality, disability] and family issues that impact their learning (McIntosh, 1989).
<b>Race</b>	A socio-political construct that is associated with physical attributes.
<b>Racial literacy</b>	Racial literacy, also known as racial consciousness, refers to an individual's deeper awareness and understanding of race.
<b>Racism</b>	When policies, practices, prejudices, and discrimination result in the unqualified mistreatment of individuals or groups of individuals from a racial or ethnic group.
<b>Reflective practices</b>	The ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in a process of continuous learning and pay critical attention to the practical values and theories that inform everyday actions by examining practice reflectively and reflexively.
<b>Unconscious bias</b>	Attitudes and beliefs of ourselves and others beyond our awareness that may be reinforced by environment and experiences.

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