Research Brief

New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.

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The Cultural Residents Project

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Image: Aunty Maxine with students at Chifley Public School

Research Brief

What is the problem?

First Nations communities have long fought for greater authority and agency in connection with formal schooling (Beresford, 2012). Although the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers mandate that all teachers should have an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and the ACARA Cross-Curriculum Priorities require the teaching of Indigenous perspectives across all disciplines, the largely non-Indigenous teaching workforce feels ill-equipped to teach Indigenous perspectives in a meaningful way (Lowe & Galstaun, 2020).

Australian schools were not originally designed to sustain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' connection to their communities and culture; in fact, they were overt tools of assimilation. When Aboriginal children could access schooling at all, it was viewed as preparation for a life of manual labour or domestic servitude. Until the 1970s, Aboriginal children could be excluded from school at the request of white parents (Beresford, 2012). Australia has a long way to go to right these wrongs and to show Aboriginal people that schools are safe places for them and their children.

There is also a pattern of mainstream Australia believing negative stereotypes and historical inaccuracies about Aboriginal people and culture (Shay et al., 2021). This has resulted in many non-Indigenous Australians not believing that learning about Indigenous culture will be relevant or meaningful to them. However, this is beginning to change, with a 2020 World Vision survey of over 1,000 Australians showing that most (68%) are unsatisfied with how they were taught First Nations histories and cultures in school, and they wish they knew more.

What we did about it

A 2021 survey conducted by World Vision showed that 61% of Australians believe that involving First Nations peoples is the best way to improve education about First Nations histories and cultures, and 63% believe that First Nations people have a right to share their culture in schools.

Research shows that partnerships between schools and Indigenous communities, and the embedding of Indigenous cultural knowledge and perspectives in schools, can improve schooling for ALL students (Bishop et al., 2021). We aim to illustrate the impact of having an Aboriginal Cultural Resident employed in schools to improve the teaching of Indigenous perspectives. We believe this should be a mainstay of every Australian school. Just as no school would be complete without a principal, a library, or a physical education program, no school should be complete without a First Nations Cultural Resident to guide teachers and students in their engagement with First Nations histories, cultures and knowledges.

In our project, a local Cultural Resident, Dharawal woman Aunty Maxine Ryan of the La Perouse Community, has been employed for 3 years at a level commensurate with teaching staff in recognition of the value of her knowledge and her role in schools. She works two days per week across several school terms with classroom teachers to collaboratively plan, implement, document and evaluate the integration of Aboriginal histories, knowledges and cultures across the curriculum.

Building strong relationships based on mutual respect and trust is imperative to the success of initiatives involving Aboriginal communities and schools (Bishop et al., 2021). In this project, UNSW and the Eastern Suburbs Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group work in partnership to bring the project to local area schools. We build on our existing relationships begun within the UNSW Matraville Education Partnership, founded in 2015. We have been fortunate to find principals and teachers in many local schools who are excited about the project. Before starting work in any new school, a period of relationship-building occurs and ongoing professional learning is conducted with staff so that they are on board with the ethos of the project and so that the school can create a culturally safe work environment for Aunty Maxine.

What we found

We hope by the end of three years (2020-2022) to show positive outcomes in teacher attitudes and confidence toward working with Indigenous people and perspectives, and in high levels of student engagement for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A pilot study conducted in 2016-2018 (The Culture, Community and Curriculum Project) showed that the teachers involved built their capacity to meet professional standards, engage with local community, advocate for reconciliation, and work with Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum in meaningful, non-tokenistic ways (UNSW, 2019).

In interviews conducted in 2020 during the Cultural Residents project, teachers and school leaders have reported many positive outcomes of working with a Cultural Resident, notably:

- Increased connection between their school and the local Aboriginal community
- Increased confidence in the authenticity and appropriateness of Aboriginal content and perspectives they are teaching
- Increased intercultural and historical understanding for themselves and their students
- High levels of student engagement when working with Aunty Maxine and learning about Aboriginal perspectives

Additionally, we have seen concrete outcomes such as some schools reporting increases in Aboriginal student attendance during the terms Aunty Maxine is at their school; changing their sports house names from early British explorers and colonisers to local Aboriginal names of significance; schools initiating Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) and schools incorporating Aboriginal education and community engagement into their strategic plans.

We are excited to be partnering with World Vision, who are convening a nationwide advocacy campaign, #KnowYourCountry, to have a First Nations Cultural Educator in every primary school in Australia. In the next two years we will continue to gather data to show the benefits of this concept, determine the best model for its structure and governance, and create an online toolkit to assist other communities and schools to undertake similar work.

The bottom line

Despite over a decade of policy dedicated to “Closing the Gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in education, little improvement has been seen (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). We know that deficit approaches, which position First Nations peoples as “a problem to be fixed”, are ineffective, and instead we need to find ways to innovate the education system to be more supportive of First Nations peoples and knowledges (Bishop, 2020). In other words, we need to close a different gap – the gap in non-Indigenous understanding about First Nations peoples. First Nations peoples disproportionately bear the brunt of racism, intergenerational trauma, and cultural erasure as a result of ongoing colonisation. Having a Cultural Resident in every school is a necessary step to improve outcomes for First Nations students, to improve the quality of education for all students, and to create a more equitable society.

About the Researchers

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The UNSW Cultural Residents team includes Rose Amazan, Aunty Maxine Ryan, and Katherine Thompson. Aunty Maxine is a Dharawal woman and a member of the La Perouse Aboriginal Community with over thirty years' experience working in schools. Rose is a Senior Lecturer in the UNSW School of Education with a focus on Aboriginal education, adult literacy, and raising teachers' critical consciousness. Katherine is the Manager of the UNSW Matraville Education Partnership, an ongoing relationship between UNSW and its local educational community. Trent is an Aboriginal man who grew up in La Perouse. His family are from inland New South Wales (Wirradjuri) and South Coast (Yuin Nation) Aboriginal communities and have been a part of the local La Perouse Aboriginal community for several generations. Together with the Eastern Suburbs Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the UNSW team is working to gather evidence to show how schools can effectively engage with Aboriginal communities to improve education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, histories and cultures for the benefit of all Australian students.

Image: Aunty Maxine with students at Chifley Public School

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