



## Peter Johnson makes the case for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in your school...

The under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the professions has been the subject of many discussions; teaching is no exception.

At the 2016 census, it was estimated that 649,171 people or 2.8 percent (ABS 2017) of the Australian population identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This compares with 5.5 percent of Australian school students identifying as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (ABS 2016).

### *How does this compare?*

The National Aboriginal Education Committee commissioned research in 1979 into the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools. At the time, it was reported that 72 teachers across Australian schools identified. Hughes and Willmot (1982) projected through their research that there should have been 2,001 if proportional to the Australian population of the time.

One of those 72 teachers, Kerry Ella Fraser reflects,

Aunty Joyce Woodberry was one of the state's first Aboriginal Education Workers. She was a great advocate for the need for more Aboriginal workers, and more importantly Aboriginal teachers, in schools. Her passion inspired me to want to teach and dedicate my years of service to Aboriginal Education in schools.

There were enormous pressures, especially in my early years. The expectation was that Aboriginal Education in the schools in which I taught was not everyone's business, it was my business. I was expected to be the expert, and have all the answers. I had to organise all Aboriginal cultural activities, celebrations, homework centres, tuition groups, often with little support. There was no support network. I felt isolated.

Numerous committees, working parties, conferences and governments, state, territory and federal, have flagged the need to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers since Hughes and Willmot set their target of 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers by 1990.

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* of the 1980s (DEET 1989) included a long-term goal "to increase the number of Aboriginal people employed as ... teachers ..." (DEET 1989 p14). This was recognition of the view that "Aboriginal people generally seek education that is more responsive to the diversity of Aboriginal circumstances and needs, and which recognises and values the cultural background of students" (DEET 1989 p9).



This was reaffirmed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in 2000 (MCEETYA 2000) and acknowledged in a report to the Commonwealth Parliament in 2001 (DEST 2001).

The parliamentary report of 2001 indicated that the number of teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent had exceeded the target set by Hughes and Willmot, with 1,338 employed across Australian government schools and 52 across Catholic schools (DEST 2001 p31). This was still well below the proportion in the broader population.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* acknowledged that,

Australian schooling needs to engage Indigenous students, their families and communities in all aspects of schooling; increase Indigenous participation in the education workforce at all levels; and support coordinated community service for students and their families that can increase constructive participation in schooling.

(MCEETYA 2008).

This was consistent with the broader agenda of the Council of Australian Governments and its emerging desire to Close the Gap (COAG 2008) on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage across all aspects of life.

## **Recent movements**

However, progress appeared to languish until 2011 when the then Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, Peter Garrett, funded the *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative* (MATSIIT). The project was established with four years of funding provided up front, and drew together an experienced team of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators under the leadership of Professor Peter Buckskin of the University of South Australia. Emeritus Professor Paul Hughes and Dr Kaye Price were integral to the project.

The brief of MATSIIT was to coordinate a response to the issue across all Australian school education jurisdictions and universities to find “practical ways to encourage more Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) people to pursue a career in teaching” (Garrett 2011). The initiative also recognised the critical role which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had to play in achieving MATSIIT’s aims.

A MATSIIT commissioned study identified that there were 2,661 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools in 2012, comprising 1.2 percent of the teacher population (MATSIIT, 2014). Allowing for the constraints of the data collection, this was projected to be 3,700 teachers or just under 1.7 percent, still well below the 4.9 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students estimated to be in Australian schools at the time.



A subsequent workforce collection in 2015 revealed a net increase of 439 teachers since 2012. Whether this can be attributed to MATSITI is arguable. There are certainly indications in the analysis of the data that MATSITI provided the impetus for more culturally sensitive workplaces where teachers are more likely to identify. There was also a significantly renewed focus on strategies to contribute to the MATSITI objectives.

It appeared that the education community had risen to the challenge; a challenge that predated the work of Hughes and Willmot; a challenge that will need to continue to be met to achieve parity between the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and students in Australian schools.

The successes of recent years have been varied across the school education jurisdictions. Without a doubt, New South Wales has led the way in implementing strategies to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and build the capacity of those teachers to aspire to leadership positions.

In 2005, there were 283 teachers in New South Wales public schools who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This equated to 0.6 percent of teachers in public schools. By 2015, this had increased to 1,110 teachers or 2.23 percent. The advice of the NSW Department of Education is that this had increased to around 1,280 teachers in mid 2017.

## ***How was this achieved?***

Public Education in New South Wales is the only school education jurisdiction in Australia which provides ultimate preference for the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. This is embedded in the Teaching Service Act 1980, the act which overarches the employment of all teachers in New South Wales public schools.

Since 2008, each staffing agreement between the NSW Teachers Federation and the Department of Education has ensured that the employment of Aboriginal teachers, along with incentive transfer applicants, is considered first when filling vacant teaching positions.

This has been accompanied by the successful *Join Our Mob* (NSW DoE) promotional recruitment campaign and strategies, including scholarships, mentoring and tailored career and leadership development programs.

The successes of New South Wales also hinged on the positive relationships developed between the Department of Education's human resources team, officers of the NSW Teachers Federation and the leadership of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.



## *Maintaining momentum*

Why is parity between the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and students a desired objective?

A great strength of public schools is that they can be considered to be a microcosm of society, open to students from the breadth of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. They also provide education to students across the diverse geography of Australia. It is therefore arguable that teachers and other staff in those schools should be similarly representative. While non-government schools tend to be much more narrowly focused, particularly in terms of religious background and their presence in rural and remote communities, they should not be precluded from more closely reflecting the society beyond their school gate.

Aboriginal sportspeople have long been held up as role models for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They are often portrayed in the media and public life as successful and can readily command attention from all levels of society.

Less readily portrayed by the media as aspirational role models are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the professions, including those who have the greatest contact with young people, teachers. This is not due to any perceived lack of capacity to influence the futures of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but more likely a reflection of media attraction.

In addressing the issue of the “completion gap” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, Helme and Lamb (2011) conclude that a “school culture and leadership that acknowledges and supports Indigenous students and families is most important” in the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schooling. “Involvement of the Indigenous community in education planning and provision” are among the factors which Helme and Lamb regard as essential.

Santoro, Reid, Crawford and Simpson (2011) suggest that “teachers who have grown up and completed their schooling as Indigenous learners have a wealth of experience and knowledge about the pedagogies that are likely to be successful for Indigenous students”. They explore the holistic approach to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, within and outside the school, presenting a view that only teachers who have experienced life as an Indigenous child and learner can fully understand the cultural, social and cognitive needs of Indigenous students. They do, however, acknowledge that “Indigenous people are not a culturally homogenous group”.

There is a wealth of literature to support the view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students benefit from being taught by teachers who are also of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.



## Over to the next generation

Kerry Ella Fraser recalled,

It was always a proud moment when ex-students said it was due to my influence that they chose Aboriginal Studies in high school to learn more about Aboriginal people, culture and history.

Developing and implementing a writing program for small groups of kindergarten children and seeing the data showing that all children had progressed significantly.

My advice to young Aboriginal people thinking of teaching is to find out what the job is like, visit classrooms, volunteer and experience what really happens in a classroom. Watch how teachers interact with students and witness those many hats a teacher wears.

Ongoing success will only be achieved when the critical mass of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers across all school education jurisdictions reaches the point of parity, when targets are no longer needed and when the training, recruitment and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and school leaders is viewed as a mainstream outcome.

MATSITI has been a significant catalyst for this to occur. Governments, teacher educators and school education jurisdictions now need to take up the running.

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This is an updated version of an article first published in *Professional Voice*, Vol. 12, Issue 1 Spring 2017  
<https://www.aevic.asn.au/news-media/professional-voice>