

Positive approach to Indigenous education

Even the most conversant educator can be sobered by the stark reminder that Indigenous Australia comprises more than 400 individual tribal or nation groups, and more than 700 different languages.

Speaking to teacher-delegates at the inaugural Aboriginal Education K-12 Conference last month, Natalie Pierson, a proud Koori woman from La Perouse and an Aboriginal Education and Engagement Advisor for the Department of Education, explained that when an Aboriginal person speaks of "Country" it means so much more than the continent known as Australia.

"Country is that place we come from," she said. "It is where our soul breathes; it is where our mob are, our homeland, our tribal clan area. It is our values, our traditions, our language, our songs and our stories. It is not just a place on a map."

Explaining the vital importance of the Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country ceremonies, Ms Pierson said that "welcoming others onto the land" asks for an assurance that local protocols will be upheld; that the guest is acknowledging the legacy of the land's elders and stepping

onto their country with respect.

"While a Welcome to Country ceremony can only be performed by an elder of that country, teachers and school leaders should embrace their freedom to perform an Acknowledgement of Country," Ms Pierson explained.

"It pays the utmost respect to Aboriginal Australians, recognising them as the first Australians and it promotes an awareness of the history and culture of Aboriginal people.

"It formally acknowledges Aboriginal people's ongoing connection to the land and puts Aboriginal Australians back on the map, recognising their contributions."

Nathan Towney, a Wiradjuri man from Wellington, NSW, and the principal of Newcastle High School, said teachers should also explicitly teach all students why the ceremony matters, so non-Indigenous Australians understand the significance and Indigenous Australians feel validated.

"If you want your Aboriginal students to form positive connections with their school, they have to see it as a safe place that they are connected to," he said. "If we can get students to feel engaged with their school, we are half way

NATHAN TOWNEY'S ABORIGINAL EDUCATION "BIBLES"

- *Good Morning Mr Sarra*, by Chris Sarra. Published by University of Queensland Press.
- *World Class Learners*, by Yong Zhao. Published by SAGE Publications Inc.
- *Uplifting Leadership: How Organisations, Teams, and Communities Raise Performance*, by Andy Hargreaves, Alan Boyle and Alma Harris. Published by John Wiley and Sons Inc.
- *Visible Learning For Teachers*, by John Hattie. Published by Taylor and Francis Ltd.

to improving their educational outcomes."

Tammy Anderson, a Biripi woman and principal who grew up with her family on Dharawal country in Airds, NSW, added: "What works for Aboriginal students, works for all students."

"When an Aboriginal person feels disconnected from their country, in a school environment, their engagement falls. Structures need to be established within the school to assist them to reconnect.

"Teachers need to know who these children are, where they came from. Aboriginal people are not one big homogenous group. Each person has a spiritual connection to a place, their country, that allows them to feel at ease."

Mr Towney suggests asking yourself what you know about your students. "Often teachers know all about the students at the

ASSESSMENT TASK SCAFFOLDING

As outlined by course presenter Catherine Jeffery:

- What will I need to know by the completion of the assessment task?
- What skills do I need to complete the task?
- What resources will I need?
- What are the key concepts?
- What are the essential elements of the task?
- How will my time management look?

high end and the bottom end; but all children need to feel known and important," he said.

"We know that a child who feels valued and has their identity validated will have bigger, better outcomes at school."

Mr Towney said research shows children who are part of extra-curricular activities feel a greater connection to the school; and the more opportunities we open up for our students, the greater their learning and achievement.

"Look outside the standard curriculum to raise connection and outcomes," he said. "Remember, every time we achieve growth in an individual, we achieve growth across the state."

Ms Anderson said the most important thing educators can do is ensure they have an Aboriginal Education Policy in their school. "Take the Department policy and contextualise it for your school," she said. "Make the commitment to Aboriginal education, and let your wider community know. Be transparent."

GUIDE TO WELCOME CEREMONIES

For assistance or guidance for a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country ceremony at your school, these resources are recommended:

Welcome to Country

- Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG)
- Local Aboriginal land council

- Aboriginal Education Team (school services).

Acknowledgement of Country

- NSW AECG
- Aboriginal Education Team (school services)
- Aboriginal land council
- Local council.

She said Aboriginal education must be authentic and contextual; built in, not bolted on. She suggested these key components:

- Set up your “A Team”, staff within the school team structure who will lead Aboriginal education.
- Include Aboriginal education in your strategic direction and ensure there is accountability for its inclusion.
- Write an Aboriginal education action plan to drive change and ensure there is accountability and data.
- Demand professional learning for everyone, every year, internal and external, that focuses on the three Cs: curriculum, culture and community.
- Form partnerships with elders, families and other services in your local area.

“I cannot stress enough the importance of community consultation when it comes to Aboriginal education,” Ms Anderson said.

“Being sensitive to cultural protocols and seeking advice from the community to guide and shape the school will build strong relationships that are so important to Aboriginal education.”

Ms Anderson and Mr Towney

cautioned against approaching the AECG with any expectations.

“Telling them what you want is not consulting,” Ms Anderson said. “And if they show you a tough exterior, be patient. Many have had a negative experience with schooling and there may be a lack of trust. But persist; it will be worth it.”

Mr Towney added: “And slow down, move slowly. Sometimes the process can be frustrating but consultation takes time.”

Many presenters spoke of the generational impact on Aboriginal students, but none more fervently than Catherine Jeffery, head teacher of Teaching and Learning at Inverell High School.

Ms Jeffery established Aboriginal Studies in Year 9 in 2007, and it is now one of the most popular subjects in Years 9 to 12. She also works with the Department’s Curriculum Innovations team and the Australian Human Rights Commission developing teaching resources for Stage 5 and 6 Aboriginal Studies and Stage 3 through to Stage 6 History.

“In 1976, over half of all Indigenous men aged 20 to 64 had either never attended school or left school by 14. By 2011, this represented

only 14 per cent,” she said. “This means we have more Aboriginal students than ever before, but for many of them, their parents have no shared experience of schooling.”

Ms Jeffery encourages teachers to heavily scaffold tasks for students, to put a safety net not just around the students, but also their parents.

Birpai woman Sue French, from Coolongolook, who has worked at a number of city and country high schools and been a principal since 2002, agrees.

“Our job as teachers is to create circumstances so that kids can do the best they can; we need to let them in on the secret,” she said. “We need to demystify education not just for the kids, but also for their parents.”

Sara Johnston, an Aboriginal teacher at Rutherford Public School and President of Maitland Local AECG, said that so much of Aboriginal education is “off the cuff” and “guided by the kids”.

Because it’s crucial that all learning be contextual, teachers need to be intimately aware of what’s going on in their students’ lives. “In any school where there is high multiculturalism and low SES, relationships are the key to

everything,” she said.

Ms Anderson said it is a common mistake for teachers to present Aboriginal content out of context.

“You must know the context when embedding cultural perspectives into the curriculum,” she said. “Be mindful of imagery and what they represent to the community.”

Ms French added: “This includes artwork. For example, dot paintings are from the Western Desert, and the didgeridoo is a northern Australian instrument. It doesn’t mean you can’t explore these things in NSW, but you must attribute the knowledge to the correct Country.”

Perhaps the greatest lesson of the conference lay in the simplest idea; that Aboriginal students are best placed to be the teachers of Aboriginal culture; not only because this instils a sense of pride in their cultural identity but also because they own the knowledge.

“Culture will beat strategy every time,” Ms Anderson said.

Ms French agreed: “Aboriginal Australians own their knowledge, don’t steal it.”

— **Kim Richards**