
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER TEACHERS – TELLIN' THE STORIES OF TEACHERS: TELLIN' THE STORIES OF TEACHING

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Abstract

The paper draws on research – *Tellin' the stories of teachers: Tellin' the stories of teaching* project – that forms part of the national More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative. This Initiative aims to increase the number and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the profession. A problematic is therefore raised from the outset – how can the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers be increased and what conditions promote retention? *Tellin' the stories of teachers: Tellin' the stories of teaching* creates a digital and historical archive of 15 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples presenting perspectives as students, graduate teachers and experienced academics. This collection of voices interpolates a teacher's work and life with what it means to be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. The paper uses critical theoretical frames to analyse the data/stories of the project participants to extrapolate out the following key themes:

Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions in education;

Building better foundations through critical engagement;

Agency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge transmission;

Embodying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in our work and life.

Introducing the Project

In reading this paper it is important to note that the first author is an Aboriginal academic of longstanding and two of the team members of the project referred to are also Aboriginal academics. The second author is a non-Aboriginal person who shares and practises the same social justice principles as the Aboriginal academic colleagues. It is also important to note that the paper gives priority to the naming of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in preference to the naming of 'Indigenous', however, where the name 'Indigenous' is used, it is as a direct reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

In 2011 the Yunggorendi First Nations Centre at Flinders University successfully bid for the development of a project funded by the then Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) through the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research (DUCIER) at the University of South Australia. The Australian Government *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI)* (<http://matsiti.edu.au/>) posed a particular set of problematics that were reflected at the University where the project team were employed. That is, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in initial teacher education at Flinders University and the number of students graduating from teacher education degrees, gaining employment and remaining within the classroom remained low. The Initiative to have More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers recalled a former National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) policy drive to grow the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to 1000 by 1990 (<http://matsiti.edu.au/1000-teachers-by-1990/>; Bunda, 2006). In part the MATSITI is a call to reinscribe the profession within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander frames from the point of initial teacher education with an Indigenised curriculum to the levels of graduate and experienced teachers in the classroom. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants of the project (*Tellin' the stories of teachers: Tellin' the stories of teaching* www.flinders.edu.au/tellinthestories) speak from each of these locations and offer further dialogue to understand the work/life nexus in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education.

This paper provides an analysis of these speaking positions and brings to the fore the complexities formed by an almost three decade policy hiatus in this specific field; the working realities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the classroom; the realities of being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person engaged in initial teacher education and the location of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities and knowledges for shaping these critical dialogues. These propositions were critical given current systemic practice at the university and education sector level to determine the shape of the profession within white ways of knowing (Martin, 2008; Arbon, 2008). In centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, a different knowing of teacher education is being articulated through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student, classroom teacher and academic positionings. In this way the project commenced a disruption of what counts for normalised understandings of a teacher's work and life by re-shaping this professional space through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing.

The project was governed by a Reference Group comprising representatives from each of the education sectors - Catholic Education South Australia (SA), Association of Independent Schools of SA, the SA Department for Education and Child Development as well as the School of Education, Flinders University. A further governance strategy of the project saw the inclusion of a Project Champion, a recent Aboriginal graduate employed in the classroom as a teacher, who was selected for holding a high profile within the Aboriginal Communities of SA and the Northern Territory (NT). The Reference Group met twice during the course of conducting the project. Members of the Reference Group provided advice and assisted in disseminating project knowledge.

The Yunggoendi Centre at Flinders University provided the foundation from which the project team was able to recruit participants for the interviews. An additional and unique aspect of the project was the recruitment of Aboriginal students enrolled in the Flinders Screen Studies degree to undertake filming of the interviews and assist with production. This aspect of the project had a threefold benefit in that the students were able to add the project to their portfolios and derive further employment (for example, two of the students received commissioned work from National Indigenous

Television (NITV)). Thirdly, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interviewees experienced a greater sense of cultural safety given the crew was 'our own mob' (in Aboriginal vernacular) and the film location was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre where the students operate with greater senses of belonging in the University.

A number of themes emerged from the interview data which give voice, and at times critically so, to a range of matters for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples engaged in teacher education. This data is analysed within the next section of the paper to bring to bear standpoint positions (Haraway, 2004; Bunda, Zipin & Brennan, 2012) that are situated with the lived realities of being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person and through an embodiment of the concomitant needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities to inform the work/life nexus within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing (Martin, 2008; Arbon, 2008). In doing so, the analysis is theoretically framed by the argument offered by Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata who states that:

We need a theory that as its first principle can generate accounts of communities of Indigenous peoples in contested knowledge spaces, that as its second principle affords agency to people and that as its third principle acknowledges the everyday tensions, complexities and ambiguities as the very condition that produces the possibilities in the spaces between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions... [Working from] Indigenous standpoint[s enables us] to untangle ourselves [from simplistic dualisms and] understand our varied responses to the colonial world (Nakata, 2007, p. 217).

The project therefore provides a further contribution to dialogues across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints and the possibilities for transformation in the shared space with white peoples for producing an innovative response to teacher education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education specifically whilst being mindful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community needs. The analysis in this paper is organised around the following key themes:

1. Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions in education

2. Agency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge transmission
3. Building better foundations: becoming critical
4. Embodying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in our work and life.

1. Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions in education

I believe that we already had an education system here before Captain Cook arrived, a really good working one in a lot of ways. I just think we need to capture that again, capture the meaning of what education means to Aboriginal people and ... [our] Communities and it needs to [be] on the agenda for a lot of schools.

This project participant (Student 1), an initial teacher education student and Indigenous Community Education Officer in an urban Adelaide school is signalling in his standpoint an Aboriginal sovereign and uncompromising position with regard to knowledge and knowledge production in the schooling experience. This sovereign standpoint speaks back into a remembering of a time when Aboriginal traditions in education were normalised in this land and are recalled for strategic intercept into the current day teaching and learning agendas. There is in this student's speaking position an understanding that white systems of education can often treat the traditions of Indigenous education at superficial levels or are seen as too complex to implement without the parallel realisation that such treatments contribute to the inflexibility of white education systems to attend to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and, by extension, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. White education systems, invented since the time of Captain Cook, capture and re-capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over and over again, hence the student's desire to recapture the education system '*we already had*'. There is also an acknowledgement of an act of 'gift giving' in the student's speaking position: the gift of an education system before Captain Cook to operate as a corrective to poor education outcomes in Indigenous education (<http://deewr.gov.au/closing-gap-indigenous-disadvantage>) thereby formulating a different foundation from which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can succeed and allay the fears and anxieties around implementing this agenda.

A solution for abating the fears and anxieties performed by white teachers/educators in making connections to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, peoples and Communities is resolved by an Aboriginal academic participant (Academic 1) of the project who states:

...teachers need to have exposure to the idea that, you don't need to be afraid, that the Aboriginal community wants to be engaged in the education process, and that if non-Indigenous educators are willing to take that step to include the Indigenous community in the classroom and in the school environment, then that partnership can be really very valuable.

The inclusion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in the classroom reduces the distance in speaking across different locations. Non-Indigenous/white educators would thus be better positioned to better hear and therefore understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander positions. Fear of or anxiousness in meeting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'other' will not dissipate until white teachers/educators and systems take seriously that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities want to be engaged in the educative process. The quality of this relationship will be determined by the extent to which white educators and systems act to 'unfix' the stagnant interface (Nakata, 2007) where racialised norms proffer as a result of not registering the concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and Communities. In acknowledging that white educators must be willing to 'take that step to include the Indigenous community' the Aboriginal academic is identifying the disparate positions of power inherent in the relationship. In taking the step into the interface to meet with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community there is then a needed demonstration by white educators to expend labours and reconfigure power towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is the necessary agency required for 'closing the gap' (<http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap>). The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Communities into the life learning work of the school and classroom is a necessary first step for establishing the solid ground from which the traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education can be recaptured again as articulated by Student 1. The valuing of Indigenous knowledge traditions and the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the educative process does however raise tensions if

that 'valuing' and 'engagement' actualises only as a result of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander labours.

2. Agency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge transmission

I've asked the question a number of times to people that I work with here at the Centre - 'Where is our labour most needed?', and I think our labour is most needed in our Communities. And sometimes the task of taking up the teaching of non-Aboriginal Australia about Aboriginal Australia ... whilst a very important and worthy thing to do, actually is a drain on the kind of resources that we have available to us at the moment; we don't have the critical mass in order to be able to do that kind of work. So, if all the Aboriginal teachers were only working in the schools, how do we effect change in other ways, change in policy, change in the big picture issues that Aboriginal communities are dealing with today? So, whilst I think the profession is rewarding, it's a great place to develop your skills and to learn how to actually work with people in a really challenging environment but, ultimately ...the question has to be asked about how people are being used most effectively in our Community context.

...some of the challenges for us, and I think Aboriginal trained, Torres Strait Islander trained teacher education specialists have a role in thinking this through...how do we bring about knowledge transmission across generations for Aboriginal communities is absolutely vital to our future.

The Aboriginal academic (Academic 2) here speaks into the complexity identified at the outset of the project. That is, how can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be retained in the profession when the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is expansive and simultaneously calls for systemic change and a strategic thinking through of how the immediate and long term needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities can be met? Here the academic acknowledges that the teaching profession nurtures valuable skill development and understanding of systems. He points to the dilemmas associated with development in Community contexts by asking the question how can skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people work most effectively to assist

in realising Community aspirations. The solution is not easily found. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education workforce is needed as much as the skill set of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education workforce can offer in developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. What is evident in both agendas is that much labour needs to be expended by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional to educate white systems and resist colonisation continuing. It is this labour that is often not acknowledged within the profession, yet the profession needs to take account of this for conceptualising and transforming an education system that will work for our Communities and importantly, sustain the agendas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education even when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not present.

The use value of schools and white education systems is configured differently by two of the Aboriginal academics involved in the project. In the first place, the question asked by Academic 2 - *'Where is our labour most needed?'* positions the skill and expertise found in the Aboriginal teacher as the necessary scaffolding required for Aboriginal nation building. Academic 3 however, makes the argument for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence in the classroom and school. She states:

I think we need Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people in schools. I think they're role models, I think they are future leaders. It's about showing our children that they can be in a school space and that there is a nurturing of them and a caring of them in regards to their Aboriginal identity and also their knowledge systems. It's about I guess showing mainstream society that Aboriginal people can achieve as educators and that we have a long generational history of education within our lives, and that that can also go into western schooling and it shouldn't be at the expense of our own cultural knowledge or our identity. And so I think having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in schools is about saying that we have knowledge that is of value to all students.

The tensions to be found in the working lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the profession of teacher education is encapsulated in both speaking positions of Indigenous Academics 2 and 3. Into this mix we add further questions: Can the Aboriginal nation build whilst the

white nation remains ignorant of the need for Aboriginal nation building?; and who is best placed to nurture the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems? Both questions pose their own problematics and certainly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers have a role to play in both agendas. As a limited national resource, the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators can meet both agendas adds particular strains. These strains are particularly known and felt when only one Aboriginal teacher is employed in the school.

3. Building better foundations: becoming critical

I definitely would like to see more Aboriginal educators. For myself, I'm only one teacher in a school full of 1300 students...and we talk about reconciliation and it is a really hard fight. I just think we need to be that person in front of people and showing that we're trying to make change, break down the stereotypes.

[I have] other teachers coming to me, asking for advice about students, about Aboriginal students, and not knowing how to approach it, and I'm just saying... you're an experienced teacher, why can't you just approach it as any other teacher would and throw different methodologies into the mix and approach it differently, see what works, what doesn't work, ...try that way and then if it's still not working, well then, hey I think I can give you a few pointers.

The Aboriginal graduate teacher identifies the irony to be found in the 'on the ground' practice of Aboriginal Reconciliation (a people's movement) in education. That is, 'it is a really hard fight'. His observation that the work of Reconciliation is a space of ongoing tension and flux does not deny the need for an Aboriginal teacher to drive a transformative agenda through education. In speaking of his position within the classroom situation the graduate teacher is also identifying that the 'really hard fight' would be less if there were more Aboriginal educators. In this way Reconciliation as a principle for knowledge exchange, cultural inclusivity and justice is laid bare particularly when the labours in 'reconciling' are perceived as largely the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples. This is in evidence for the graduate teacher because he sees quite clearly how he is positioned as the pivot for that work to be undertaken. In his speaking position there is further exposure in that the work of the school to reconcile remains disparate to the work and life of the Aboriginal teacher located within it. Other project interviews revealed that Indigenous alumni find that their capacity as a teacher is best fulfilled when schools are politicised and take agency in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The capacity to undertake responsibilities in Reconciliation specifically and the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students more broadly is met when white educators and systems come to terms with understanding engagements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in racialised rather than purely cultural spaces.

When it comes to retention and also professional learning for Aboriginal education officers as well as our Aboriginal teachers and all teachers and educational officers, one of the key goals that we have is a focus on looking at cultural awareness but through a different lens perhaps than has been used in the past. I am particularly interested and so is my team, in advancing Indigenous perspectives through that lens of critical race theory. (Reference Group member)

A failure of cultural awareness training programs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' societies, cultures and histories is an absence of the opportunity to interrogate institutional and ideological systems of power and the individual's location within these (Dyson, 2003). Inadvertently then, cultural awareness workshops that operate without transmitting this critical knowledge reinforces the privileged position of white people to know Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples only through a soft cultural lens. The Reference Group member of the project speaks into a position that is specifically seeking to redress disparate positions of power by '*advancing Indigenous perspectives through that lens of critical race theory*'. Critical race theory, in contrast to cultural awareness, undertakes a social and educational theoretical double movement by centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives and additionally interrogates economies of self, ideology and institution (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Dyson, 2003) - a necessary apriori condition for addressing the unbalanced labours in educative Reconciliation that the Aboriginal graduate teacher

acknowledges is a feature of his working life. The lens through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are viewed is critical to understanding the embodied position taken with the Community.

4. Embodying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in our work and life

...the thing I like about my job as a teacher – that I can walk out of there and become a Community member too... I can be a sister, an aunty, a mother, a grandmother – I can be all of those things but when I walk into that classroom I'm actually a teacher; I'm actually an educator, but everything that makes me that educator is what I take into that classroom, and I think that's the important thing for me as an educator.

The Aboriginal academic (Academic 4) makes reference to her multiple locations as a Community member, mother, grandmother, sister and aunty and how each of these locations interpolates into her position as a teacher/educator. In making reference to these multiple locations Academic 4 is also signalling the value of each of these locations within Aboriginal Community contexts. A separating out and fracturing of each of the identity components may well deny a full and embodied performance as an Aboriginal teacher/educator. The profession may well not value the standpoint of these locations, yet they become markers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and Communities, particularly when these traditions are embedded in practice.

In the following quoted selections from an Aboriginal student (Student 2) who is also a professional footballer there is an articulation of generational change that adds a further dimension to but is situated with the speaking position of Academic 4.

... my dad – he would be the first to put me into line if I did anything wrong ...education wise...there wasn't even an option of dropping out and made sure I finished...

I take a bit of defensive mind set into a lot of things I do ...and try to shut a lot of doubters up ... whether it's footy, whether it's education...that's sort of something that really drives

me to want to finish my degree and also ...hopefully play well in footy. Personally that's one of the big motivational things for me...

...to be an educator...people really do look up to you if you've gone through to finish uni, even finishing high school you know...just the pride in your family's face to say you've finished it and now to go on and do further education and that's something that I'll really push my kids to finish and hopefully install in them a really good education so it furthers them and steadies them for what lies ahead in life.

If there was one message that you could leave behind and sort of pass on to people it would have to be education has to come first...

The Aboriginal initial teacher education Student 2, similarly to Academic 4, holds to multiple locations in that he is an elite athlete, father and student. Both hold to positions that value education whilst recognising that being an educator is also to signpost an embodiment for maintaining Aboriginal identity. Both speaking positions hint at threats to the Aboriginal locations whether it is the Student that talks of the need to *'shut a lot of doubters up'* or the Academic who nominates that, *'I can be all of those things'*. An acknowledgement of these embodied multiple locations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are critical for maintaining and developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence within the profession.

Conclusion

Tellin' the stories of teachers: Tellin' the stories of teaching provides a digital record of interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators who bear witness to the process of initial teacher education; what it means to be an educator; the tensions that arise in nation building projects particularly when the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher is a scarce resource; the extra labours associated with being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander educator and the need to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educator as an embodiment of Community. The voices provide dialogue to speak to each other across multiple Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander identity locations and as living texts, speak of the importance of acknowledging Indigenous traditions for education and enhancing trans-generational knowledge transmission. In the speaking positions of the project participants there is a need to be critical of education systems and ideologies to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and knowledge systems are included. The themes brought forth from the data and analysis commences a demonstration that the work and lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers/educators are ultimately inter-textually bound to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities.

For there to be more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, dialogue across Indigenous and white locations must remain open, even when the conversations are fraught. Additionally, there is also a need for the dialogue to remain robust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander locations. It has been the intent of this paper to speak across and into these locations, but also to provide impetus for further research to tell further stories of teaching within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theoretical standpoint locations. We conclude with a statement by Student 1 and in doing so add our voice to his desire that education becomes a space where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander position is acknowledged, heard and acted upon.

I just think in a perfect school environment we would no longer need to have people like myself working in schools, that the whole school becomes a Nunga Room and that it's a safe place to talk about Aboriginal issues...

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