

Changing minds, changing hearts, changing schools

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By using a learning framework, these school leaders led improvement, innovation and change, as well as engaged and worked with the community by addressing a gap in teacher awareness of how to effectively embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the Australian curriculum.

Implementing AITSL Standards 1.4 and 2.4

Reflecting on my leadership as a principal, I have come to realise my shameful ignorance and dismissal of the history and culture of the very country in which I was born and educated. If promoting equity and excellence, and creating and sustaining the conditions under which quality teaching and learning thrives depended on my knowledge of Indigenous Australian cultures, then I was doomed to fail, and did. Sadly, this shortcoming went unnoticed and was unremarkable within the school communities in which I worked. While I excelled at innovation, revamped learning spaces and radically reformed reporting systems in my schools, I slipped under the radar in fulfilling the AITSL Principal Standard: 'To work with members of the school community to ensure a knowledge and understanding of the traditional rights, beliefs and culture of

Australia's Indigenous people' (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2014b, p. 7). Through ignorance and a lack of awareness, it was easy to forego this culturally important inclusion in favour of the loftier lustre of continuous school improvement through more general curriculum and pedagogical reform. This story of neglect is not uncommon, although in my case it has a happy ending.

Leaders of learning aim to support teachers to meet the AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers (2011), including 1.4 and 2.4. This means knowing how to include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum planning and, more importantly, in assessment across a number of learning areas. Too often, however, Standards 1.4 and 2.4 are overlooked or excused – silently considered less important or at worse, irrelevant. Many teachers report a lack of confidence in knowing what, and how, to teach Aboriginal and Torres Islander perspectives in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways.

Understanding history and its consequences

Over the past two years I have been researching how to better support teachers in becoming more aware of the impact of colonisation in Australia. This has resulted in the development of the Australians Together Learning Framework, which is essentially a backward design model (Wiggins & McTighe 2011) based on five key ideas (see Figure 1). The first key idea acknowledges the continuous wound that colonisation inflicted on Indigenous Australians. The second is designed to increase awareness of the untold history by exposing teachers and students to true and challenging stories. The third idea assists learners to accept that the consequences of our past policies and actions are relevant to each and every Australian today. The fourth helps teachers and students understand and respect their own identity and therefore the identity of others. The fifth idea helps teachers to find ways to embed these understandings in curriculum through authentic assessment tasks. It provides opportunities for learners to respond by connecting with local community and seeking to build relationships, which leads to cultural change.

The Australians Together Learning Framework: Case studies

The following two case studies tell the story of school leaders who found ways to implement sustainable improvement through a courageous realisation of a gap in teacher awareness and their preparedness to invest in professional learning and curriculum reform by using the Australians Together Learning Framework.

During 2016-17, my colleagues and I conducted two in-school pilot programs using the Australians Together Learning Framework. The first pilot was co-presented with Indigenous and non-Indigenous facilitators, and the second used pre-recorded stories facilitated by myself. The pilots revealed that while both Year 9 and Year 12 students were transformed by the experience, they also expressed palpable frustration and disappointment that they had not been taught the whole history of their country before this time. They recounted having some cursory lessons on Australian colonisation, exploration and settlement but did not understand the significance and lasting impact colonisation continues to have on many Indigenous peoples today.

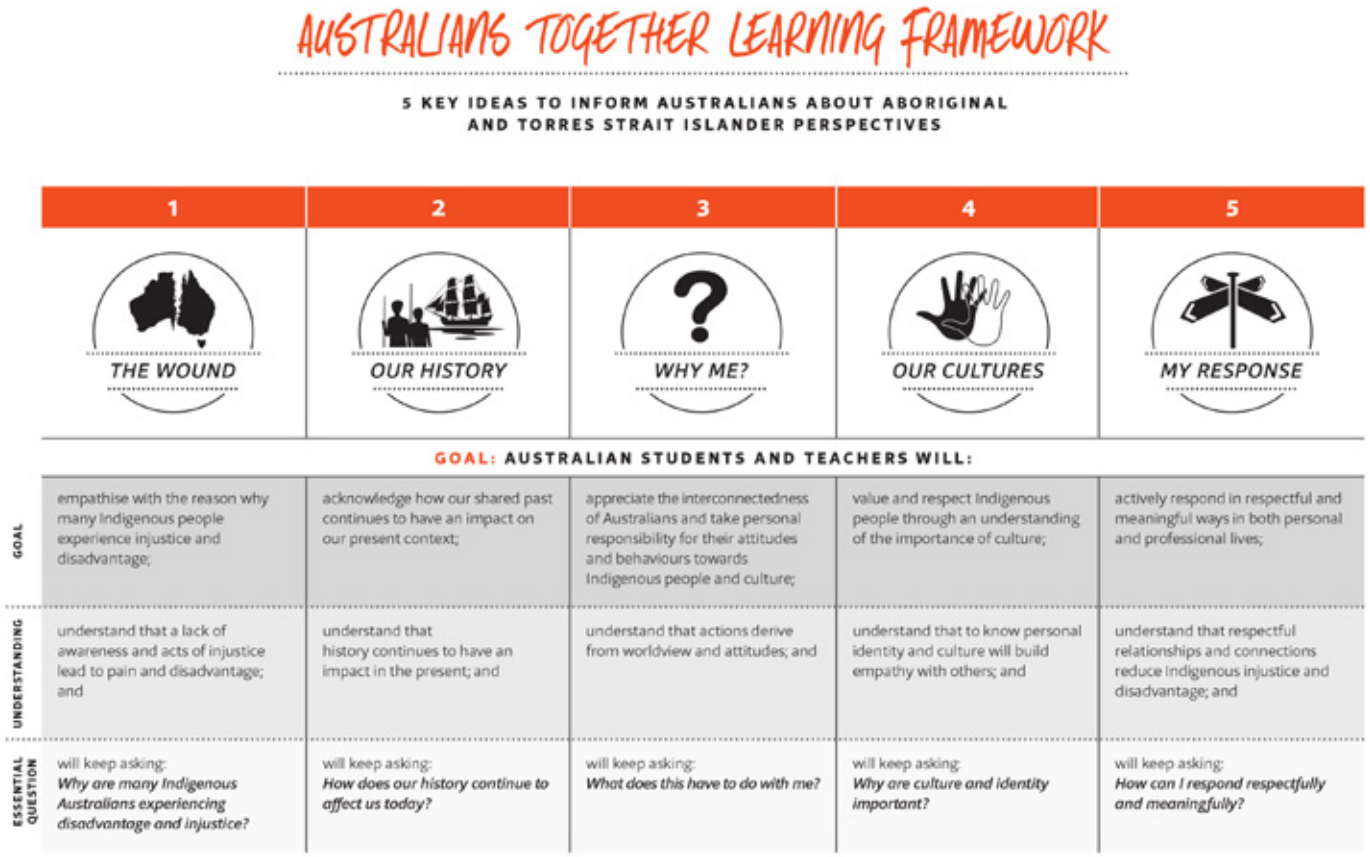


Figure 1: Australians Together Learning Framework



The Year 9 pilot was conducted with over 120 students in an independent school in Victoria. It began the previous year with a teacher professional learning workshop at which we unpacked the Australians Together Learning Framework and facilitated the design of a new trans-disciplinary unit using the Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, n.d.) curriculum framework. The unit was anchored by a rich assessment task which required students to respond to the five essential questions in Figure 1. The implementation phase of the unit began with a full-day student workshop exploring the five key ideas. We used pre-recorded stories as well as an expert Indigenous presenter. Apart from the exposure to Australian history, the key student learning was the meaning of identity, its role in shaping a person's worldview and the implications of its loss. At the end of the unit, students presented their responses to their peers, facilitators and presenters. This was a truly powerful day.

The success of the unit and the positive cultural impact it had on the school community was directly attributed to the leadership of the Head of Year 9. She had been personally challenged by the gaps in her own understanding, and through searching out and experiencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in a whole new light, she was able to lead the teaching team and students to examine their own assumptions, beliefs and actions.

The Year 12 pilot was conducted in an independent school in South Australia and had similar school-wide transformative outcomes. Again, we used the Australians Together Learning Framework, pre-recorded stories of Indigenous peoples' experiences and perspectives over two days. The unit was part of a Culture and Society, SACE Stage 2 subject. The key student learning was attributed to the design of the assessment task which required students to personally reflect on their own attitudes and values.

Simple pre- and post-workshop student surveys were conducted which revealed a significant shift in student perception (Graph 1, 2, 3 & 4) as a result of the workshop. The students were asked to rate their personal understanding and confidence in using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their work. There were 15 respondents. The survey data, their formal assessment pieces along with face-to-face recorded interviews gave triangulated evidence of a significant shift in their perceptions.



Graph 1: Australians Together student survey response Q1



Graph 2: Australians Together student survey response Q2



Graph 3: Australians Together student survey response Q3



Graph 4: Australians Together student survey response Q4

As with the Year 9 cohort, the Year 12 students questioned why they had not been exposed to the importance and significance of this knowledge until their final year of schooling. Their passion was so ignited that they led a full school assembly where they challenged the stereotypes held by their peers. Several months after the unit, post-workshop interviews were recorded which demonstrated a lasting change in student attitudes and actions.

Both of these case studies demonstrate how school leaders increased proficiency in leading teaching and learning, developed self and others, led improvement, innovation and change, and engaged and worked with the community (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2014b). Just as the genesis of the AITSL standards lay in the importance of monitoring and evaluating teacher performance (Marshall & Zbar 2013, p. 3), the Australian Professional Standard for Principals provides a framework for what you should know, understand and do to succeed as a principal or school leader (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2014a). The Standard encourages and guides principals and school leaders in how to continually strive to understand and improve their impact. This assumes that leaders are first aware of the impact they should have, and what excellent practice looks like.

Research results

From initial unpublished research we conducted involving over 350 respondents in the Independent school sector, it appears that there is a desire for teachers to better inform their students, but there is a lack of confidence. In relation to AITSL Teacher Standard 2.4, we found that 60% of respondents reported limited or extremely limited understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which impacts their ability to promote reconciliation. This compares with 36% of respondents who indicated they need help or don't know any strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We also found that only 23% of respondents were confident in their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and that 34% struggle or didn't know how to include authentic required content in their relevant curriculum area (McCrindle 2016). From our experience, a number of school leaders also share this lack of confidence.

Over the past decade, leaders have been well served with ideas about how to make positive school improvement. The literature points to the important first step of defining where gaps in practice exist (Marshall & Zbar 2013). It is therefore time the rhetoric and reality gap between authentic inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum is more broadly acknowledged and addressed.

Widening the conversation

The question 'Why should Australian teachers rethink the way they engage with the story of Indigenous Australia?' now drives my current practice. We each respond differently depending on our cultural background and experience. Whatever the answer might be, it should include the idea that future generations of Australian citizens deserve the right to be better informed than I was. Sadly, many of our educators still blush with shame about how, and why, in 2017, we could claim that we did not know, therefore we did not act. Becoming educated and aware is the first step in building the empathy that underpins positive action and sustainable cultural change.

Cultural change starts in the hearts and minds of individuals, around dinner tables, in staff room chats and most importantly, in challenging and robust classroom discussions that are well informed by the truth. The next step for me is to facilitate a peer reviewed research project to determine the effectiveness of the Australians Together Learning Framework. It also means posing the essential questions to as many people as possible who are seeking to improve their schools and ensure their students no longer remain ignorant about the knowledge and understanding of the traditional rights, beliefs and culture of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

References

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Dr Susan Starling joined the Australians Together team in 2016 as the Head of Education and brings to the role extensive experience in the school and tertiary sectors as a teacher, school principal, teacher educator and Dean of Education. Sue is also an education consultant, author and presenter with a focus on curriculum and whole school improvement. Sue's role in Australians Together is to create opportunities for teachers to plan and implement the Australian Curriculum in ways that will enhance respectful relationships and connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and to meet AITSL Standards. Sue believes that education is the avenue that will lead to understanding, mutual respect and a positive shared future for all Australians. Sue lives in the lovely Adelaide Hills where she is happiest in her gum boots and caring for her extended family. Sue gained her PhD from Flinders University, South Australia, in 2013.