

2023 Premier’s Teachers Mutual Bank Aboriginal Education Scholarship

Engaging Aboriginal students in their learning

What works best

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# Introduction

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait within all aspects of education is a cross-curriculum priority area and general capability required by all teaching staff in NSW. My experience has shown however that there is still a significant gap in these inclusions and the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Research suggests that the inclusion of these perspectives is paramount in engaging Aboriginal students in their learning. I have chosen my topic as I believe there are many educational settings out there that are engaging Aboriginal students and achieving good outcomes.

# Focus of Study

This research focused on effective ways in which Aboriginal students and community can be engaged in educational settings to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal students. I planned to research programs, lessons, the inclusion of genuine resources, and community consultation with culturally safe support in schools that are having success in the outcomes for their Aboriginal students.

### Methodology

The research questions posed by this study tour are:

1. How many indigenous students are at this school?
2. How many student numbers all together?
3. Do you have an Aboriginal Language Program? How does this run?
4. What cultural programs do you offer?
5. What are your behaviour management strategies?
6. Do you have a Clontarf academy and/or girls' program?
7. How is your Year 12 retention data? Supports?
8. How is your attendance data? Supports?
9. Are you externally funded? E.g., Connected Communities School or Aboriginal Education and Learning Centre?
10. What level of Aboriginal community input do you have? examples?
11. How are your parent partnerships?
12. Do you engage effectively with your AECG (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group)?
13. Do you teach Aboriginal Studies?

### Data Collection

The data was collected during face-to-face interviews with key staff in the schools visited, observations and site tours. The roles of these staff included the following:

* Executive Principals
* Principals
* Deputy Principals
* Head Teachers
* Classroom teachers.
* Senior Leaders in Community Engagement (connected community schools)
* Leaders in Community Engagement (connected community schools)
* Aboriginal Education Officers
* School Learning Support Officers
* Elders in Residence
* Community Language Teachers
* Clontarf Directors
* AECG executive members.

Surveys were sent to other schools invited to complete, however technical difficulties led to few being completed and thus collated in time for this research report deadline.

# Significant Learning

### Do you have an Aboriginal Language Program? How does this run?

Six of the schools visited had an effective ongoing Aboriginal Language Program operating. These ranged from small groups of Aboriginal Students participating to entire year cohorts as the 100hr mandatory language requirements for the Record of School Achievement (ROSA).

The programs were delivered through methods such as itinerant Community Language Teachers, qualified LOTE teachers or community volunteers. The schools that had successfully implemented this program appeared to be on traditional Aboriginal Nations that did have community issues around traditional language boundaries.

The schools that did not have an Aboriginal Language Program in place were aiming to include this soon, but were dealing with community issues around these boundaries and the traditional language that should be taught. Some were in the process of navigating this and had begun training community members and SLSO’s to deliver it in the near future.

A central NSW school aiming for the inclusion of language has designed and implemented a Language and Culture program taught to all students in a year cohort which addressed language and culture in the local area.

In some areas there still appeared to be some gatekeeping of knowledge that had not been shared, however all schools were aware of the importance of maintaining language and were effectively in the process of aiming for its inclusion in their curriculum.

### What cultural programs do you offer?

There was a wide and varying range of cultural support and programs offered across the state. These were almost all locally developed and delivered in line with the local student and community values and needs. Some of the common programs state-wide include the following:

* Traditional Dance Troupes
* Didgeridoo Groups (Male only)
* Clontarf Boys Academy
* Nasca Girls Academy
* Programs from local service providers.
* Mentoring and Aspiration building programs from local organisations and universities etc.

Some programs that stood out across the tour included:

* The inclusion of life skills in programs i.e., financial literacy, breakfast, and lunch programs.
* **The Language and Community program** at a central NSW school conducted by community knowledge holders includes language and local histories, a large part of the program is held on country with the inclusion of visits to community sites. This school also included an embedded **Aboriginal art class** which was timetabled and had a fully equipped art space in which they displayed their art works.
* A northern NSW school that annually takes all year groups and staff to a local significant place for **cultural immersion and connecting to country** experiences facilitated by community members and Elders.
* A western NSW school with a large population of Aboriginal students that offers a **paddock to plate** style program in which the students plant, tend and harvest from a school farm before cooking the produce themselves as well as taking the recipe and meal home. The students who were participating in this during my visit were extremely engaged and proud and were more than happy to yarn with me about the entire process including a visit to the fully equipped kitchen classroom in which the cook what they have grown.

### What are your behaviour management strategies?

Behaviour statistics around Aboriginal students reflect disparities in negative entries and suspensions across NSW. Restorative Justice programs have been suggested in many circles as a potential tool for amending these disparities. In the schools visited several used this method to address behaviour management and found it effective in re-engaging students in school. Some had attempted to use this method but had found reasons that it was not effective in their setting which included staff and parent buy-in.

The remainder of the schools followed the department's behaviour management policies and procedures with the inclusion of Aboriginal support persons present for all suspensions, return from suspension interviews, and base their procedures on relationships with students and parents.

One stand-out idea from a northern NSW school was the process of using the executive member that had the best relationship with that student and/or their family to conduct all procedures around behaviour management regardless of their ‘portfolio’ within the school. This included the initial conversations around student behaviour, suspension interviews with student, phone calls to carers, wellbeing check-ins for long suspensions, the return from suspension interview and the monitoring of the student upon their return. The usual practice in this process means that the deputy that oversees that year group or cohort would manage this entire process. This school ensures the right person/people conduct the process for Aboriginal students and families which builds a trusting and respectful relationship and forms a partnership between themselves, the student, and their carers. They have found this process hugely successful in reducing behaviour issues and suspension rates.

### Do you have a Clontarf academy and/or girls' program?

Seven of the 14 schools visited had a Clontarf academy but only one had a girl's academy also. There were reasons behind this which included a lack of funding to implement it and a mistrust of the Clontarf academy. Some of the schools had issues around the Clontarf model, it’s top-down policy and its lack of flexibility to work in line with school policies and procedures.

The most effective working Clontarf academies seemed to work in partnership with the schools' values and procedures and other Aboriginal Staff. These academies worked as part of the holistic team of Aboriginal support in these schools rather than a stand-alone program situated on a school site and included local staff.

### How is your Year 12 retention data? What supports do you have in place?

All the schools visited were focussing on the Premier’s Priority area of Aboriginal retention from years 9-12. There was an overarching theme that perhaps these targets are not culturally safe due to being unrealistic and having a lack of understanding of what success looks like for Aboriginal students and families which is impacting the data collected around this.

One northern NSW school had a wide range of supports around their senior students including holding an Aboriginal Graduation dinner, the option for year 12 students to finish at lunch time to allow them to work, go home to study or undertaking other training options at the local University Community Hub. They have found this successful in assisting their retention while allowing students to follow their individual aspirations and focus on their own success. This has resulted in this school having the highest number of year 12 graduates in the region and has seen an increase in their senior enrolment numbers. This same school also offered a team that worked on Aboriginal career options from year 9-12 which offered support for year 12 students to access universities including supported visits, assistance writing applications, and assistance in applying for scholarships.

### What level of Aboriginal community input do you have? Do you engage effectively with your AECG?

Most of the schools visited had a level of community input but all agreed this had been impacted in recent years due to the Covid19 pandemic. All engaged with their AECG and many staff members at schools were executive members of their local AECG.

One Central NSW school had an outstanding level of community engagement in their setting. This was designed to ensure community cultural safety and included a direct line to the hub for community access, a side gate attached to the hub (with QR check-in) outdoor meeting areas and a large amount of aboriginal art and artefacts displayed in the front office and throughout the school. The initial appearance of the school upon visiting was one of cultural pride and safety.

### Do you offer Aboriginal Studies?

Eight of the school visited offered Stage 5 and/or 6 Aboriginal studies

# Conclusions

* The inclusion of Local Aboriginal Community members on the staff was essential for the addressing the diversity of Aboriginal students across NSW and ensured the inclusion of authentic local perspectives and in meeting the needs of the local community.
* The promotion of Aboriginal resources throughout the school setting led to culturally safe spaces where Aboriginal children and community could see their culture reflected throughout the space, leading to the promotion of cultural pride and identity.
* The provision of Aboriginal Education Spaces (in the form of learning hubs, community spaces etc) had a positive impact on the educational outcomes and promoted community inclusion.
* Funding of Aboriginal programs was not equitable across the schools visited for some schools of similar demographics. Where one school may be funded through Connected Communities or Aboriginal Learning and Engagement Centre Funding (meaning a large amount of funding for programs and staff to support Aboriginal students), a school with similar population and demographics may get no funding outside of the RAM allocation – leading to inequities in outcomes for students from non-funded schools.
* The provision of fair and equitable funding across schools with a large number of Aboriginal students should be addressed.
* The inclusion of Aboriginal spaces and faces within school settings has a significant impact of the learning of Aboriginal students.
* The establishment of Aboriginal Education Teams within schools should be considered.
* The promotion of Aboriginal Staff in leadership roles in schools should be considered. There was a significant lack of Aboriginal people in leadership roles across the schools visited, including Head Teacher, Deputy, and Principal roles.

“If it’s not working fix it... and if it is working leave it alone. We need our kids in schools to change our future.” Aunty Cheryl Blair, Dunghutti elder.

* Many of the schools visited had an established and effective Aboriginal education team which included staff from all faculties across the schools. These teams worked in subgroups focusing on issues around Aboriginal education within their respective schools. These teams were working to increase achievement and outcome through a variety of methods.
* The inconsistency of funding for Aboriginal programs was a concern, as pockets of areas seemed to have substantial funding for Aboriginal programs and supports while others had little to no funding but also had a large population of Aboriginal students.
* Two schools on the NSW south coast were achieving much success with their Aboriginal students and communities but received limited funding to make this happen.
* The inclusion of spaces for Aboriginal community and learning hubs had a significant impact on outcomes for students and their families, as did the employment of Aboriginal people in these support roles.
* There were varying levels of efficacy around Personalised Learning Plans in the schools visited. There was a range of proformas used to complete these plans.
* In some schools there was still a level of community contention around issues such as the delivery of languages etc, and this had a negative impact on student out comes in these areas.

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