



RRR Consortium to support the provision of initial teacher education to improve teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

## RRR Focus Group Findings

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### Background

In order to inform the development of a new RRR initial teacher education unit to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, a series of focus groups were conducted in April 2013.

Two focus groups were held with initial teacher education (ITE) students and two focus groups held with early career teachers to reflect on their experiences on provision of Indigenous education units in teacher education during their undergraduate study.

Capturing the perceptions of ITE students during or immediately after their study is also expected to test RRR project assumptions and inform the 'user-centred' design of the proposed RRR unit outline.

Further information about the RRR initiative can be found at [www.rrr.edu.au](http://www.rrr.edu.au) (from June 2013).

### Participant characteristics

The RRR focus groups:

- Were facilitated in a metropolitan area and a rural centre (one for ITE students and one for early career teachers in each location) in March and April 2013
- Sessions involved 8-10 participants in each group from a range of circumstances. e.g.
  - students from six different universities, courses (eg primary/secondary), from first to fourth year of study, gender
  - teachers in the first or second year in primary and secondary schools, government and non-government who had completed ITE study in the previous two years
- All participants were non-Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are captured elsewhere in the project)
- Participant responses were elicited from a discussion guide (attached), avoiding leading questions and participant responses recorded 'as is'
- The following are preliminary summary of common participant perceptions and some typical quotes from ITE students and teachers.

## Summary of focus group participant perceptions

- 1. There was very significant variation between individuals in the amount of exposure to Indigenous education content during their ITE study, from almost no contact with Indigenous education through to studying several units, and/or perspectives in other courses**
  - *I can't really recall anything specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (people). I really can't recall much about it and that's the past three years (ITE student)*
  - *Our uni does quite a lot where they teach us about all this, but unless you find out the research yourself I wouldn't feel equipped to go out into a classroom of Aboriginal students (ITE student)*
  - *I think in terms of the Indigenous Australians we have probably covered it well in two subjects, and I know in my elective of Children's Literature we touched on it straight away (ITE student)*
  - *Having done indigenous perspectives, the subject, here at uni, I've got to say I really did learn a lot that I had no idea about Australia's history and I found before then I would not have had a snowball's hope of achieving either of these. Having done that subject, I feel slightly more empowered (ITE student)*
  - *In my second year uni topic, Teaching Indigenous Students. I learnt a lot (ITE student)*
  - *During the time I was at university we basically skimmed over all Aboriginal issues quite quickly (teacher)*
- 2. Exposure to the AITSL standards was also mixed from not having seen them at all through to some exposure at university or school in-service**

(somewhat expected due to the relatively recent introduction of the standards)

  - *With the national curriculum, one of the broad overarching concepts they're looking at is the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives within your day to day teaching. I think these standards stand aside from the national curriculum, and I think, I guess if you pair these standards with what the national curriculum is requesting, you're in a better position to include those perspectives (ITE student)*
- 3. There was generally strong endorsement that graduates need to gain the necessary knowledge and skills espoused by standards 1.4 and 2.4, albeit with**
  - Mixed views on how much attention should be given to the standards along with all the other content a teaching course has to cover
  - Essential for standard 2.4 but many questioned the same need for 1.4 if they are unlikely to be placed in a school with Indigenous students (and could pick this up during in-service professional learning)
  - *I think it should be in the curriculum, definitely (ITE student)*
  - *Well it's two standards out of 37, so it's not a huge issue I suppose (teacher)*
- 4. There was general agreement that they as non-Indigenous teachers should teach about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, but this requirement was associated with anxiety about their limited knowledge and skills or 'doing the wrong thing'**
  - *I wouldn't say that I would be confident in tackling or talking about Indigenous culture and the right way to say things or immerse them in that culture myself (teacher)*
  - *I think as Australians we should have some sort of basic knowledge. There should have been at least some process of cultural osmosis we should have picked up enough that we should at least be able to give the kids some basics but as a high school level, I'm certainly not prepared (teacher)*
  - *I don't want to offend anybody by saying the wrong thing (teacher)*
  - *I do feel out my depth, coming from a very Australian background with no relatives that are Torres Strait Islander or anything like that (teacher)*
  - *I do think it (working with Indigenous children) shouldn't be spoken about as some big scary thing. That can be really dangerous (ITE student)*

5. In regard to how well their Indigenous studies prepared them for classroom practice, almost all participants expressed that explicit preparation for *skills* needed for teaching was non-existent or extremely limited. This view was also expressed by those who had a positive experience and gained *knowledge* from the information presented in their Indigenous education units
  - *I was wondering if there were any strategies that we as pre-service teachers can be taught or learn that as we then go to work in these schools we can help to raise that retention (ITE student, following observation of a staff-room in-service session about Indigenous student retention)*
  - *The course we did was more about information about Indigenous cultures, not necessarily how I'm going to put it into the classroom or the right words to say or activities I could do or resources (teacher)*
  - *I think it needs to be more practical, not just the history. You can find the history anywhere, I can do that myself. Seeing a map of South Australia and seeing all the different language regions is interesting but it doesn't help me at all teaching it, and to interact with those students, or to know what to teach (teacher)*
  - *If you were going to do a unit plan and work it with other subjects that would help a lot more than just spewing out information (teacher)*
  
6. Participants identified few experiences during their study that had significant impact on their values or ability as Indigenous educators, but were able to give many examples of 'light-bulb' ITE experiences in other domains of teaching
  - *Mine's probably been my unit on child development. I like to see what's a good example of something and what's a bad example. So a topic on a child picking up something, there'd be a good example and a bad example and you could see the difference, I like contrast, it works for me and makes me remember things (ITE student)*
  - *We have a tutor and yesterday she set up a ten minute simulated classroom on how she would introduce a new history topic to year nine or year 10 students and to be in the students perspective while also listening to her and how she would do that was more practical skills than it was when we'd just go through videos and that sort of thing (ITE student)*
  
7. With some exceptions, it was difficult to elicit forthright views about the place of anti-racism strategies in schools, possibly due to limited experience and/or discomfort when the topic is raised.
  - *We ignore the fact that we are a racist society. We've just been talking about the fact that there are things that we have shoved under the carpet (ITE student)*
  
8. The teacher group had mixed views on the degree of overt or hidden racism in their institutions and the extent to which diversity in their institutions is visible and valued (in the curriculum and activities of the school or university). Many responses used language of 'anti-bullying' rather than 'anti-racism'.
  - *It depends on what the kids are saying to each other I guess, It's still around, where I live, I live in a residential college and we have about ten Aboriginal students and other colleges have been quite racist towards them. So I think there is definitely still the potential for children to be racist in schools and it's just, I think that I would like it if we had a subject that could look at how to deal with racism and bullying in general but racism specifically because it's a whole other issue. (ITE student)*
  - *Schools are so multicultural that kids at our school, we don't have issues. My friends and colleagues who are older have more racist opinions sometimes (teacher)*

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