

Closing the gap: Using graduate attributes to improve Indigenous education

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Peter J. Anderson and Bernadette Atkinson teach Indigenous and Traditionally Education in a Global World as a fourth year unit in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Clayton. This paper is a self-reflective piece of work where we discuss the use of graduate attributes relating to Indigenous Education, put forward by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). These standards have the potential to improve pre-service teachers knowledge in relation to Indigenous education, therefore equipping them with the necessary skills and tools required to teach effectively to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The focus of this paper pertains specifically to AITSL focus area 2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians discussing how pre-service teachers can promote reconciliation and teach Indigenous subject matter in a respectful manner to non-Indigenous students.

Keywords: Indigenous education, pre-service teacher education, graduate attributes.

It is acknowledged that many Indigenous Australians prefer to be known as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, however for the purpose of this paper the word Indigenous is used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people unless otherwise stated.

Indigenous academic Marcia Langton describes the Indigenous experience in Australia as a reality show of Aboriginal suffering (2008). This vast reality show according to Langton provides a vehicle that more often than not is played out in the public eye in Australia as a political agenda that “shifts the attention away from everyday lived crisis that many Aboriginal people endure-or-do not, dying as they do at excessive rates” (Langton 2008, p.143). When it comes to Indigenous education in Australia, how do we engage with young and not so young non-Indigenous pre-service teachers,

in a way that loosens the shackles of years of exposure to Indigenous suffering often played out before their eyes and also in a way that is meaningful, that shifts from a sensationalised gaze of despair and hopelessness of the vast reality show to one of hope. A step to overcoming the vast reality show can be found in the eloquent and profound words of the late great Indigenous educator Dr Marika, which certainly serves as a guide and foundational principle not only for this paper but also for the authors and other Indigenous educators' practice. She states:

Our job as educators is to convince the people who control mainstream education that we wish to be included. Until this happens, reconciliation is an empty word and an intellectual *terra nullius*. (Marika, 1999, p.9)

The nature of this quote is both profound and empowering, illustrating as it does that despite all of the efforts by government agencies, public good will and education in healing the past wrongs contributing to the “vast reality show of Aboriginal suffering”, the reconciliation process cannot go forward successfully unless we address this intellectual *terra nullius* or absence of true Indigenous input into the curriculum. This intellectual absence or *terra nullius* is something that we in the Faculty of Education at Monash University are addressing conceptually in our pre-service teacher education program, driven by the hope of providing educational parity for Indigenous peoples, whilst we cannot claim to have all the answers nor solutions to meet this challenge. What we do believe, though, is that every Indigenous, non-Indigenous and traditionally oriented child has the right to a good life enabled by a solid educational foundation. By providing pre-service teachers with the necessary Indigenous-specific graduate attributes, we, as Indigenous faculty, are confident that our student will have the professional confidence to become educational change agents and work with Indigenous peoples to overcome this “intellectual *terra nullius*”.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

There is a scarcity of literature around the specific topic of graduate attributes relating to Indigenous educational outcomes as we have previously identified (see Ma Rhea & Anderson, 2011; Ma Rhea, Anderson, & Atkinson, 2012 for further discussion on this absence. Therefore, what we present here in this paper is a self-reflective study of practice currently being undertaken by the authors. The power and transformative effect that education plays on marginalised peoples in society, as found in the writings of Freire (1970, 1975, 1998) and hooks (1994, 1996, 2003) provide the driving intellectual framework for our practice. This is also contextualised by leading Indigenous academics such as Langton (2007), Rigney (2002), and Rose (cited in Price, 2012) to name a few.

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

In 2011, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership identified seven standards in which Australian teachers must be competent, in two specific knowledge domains: Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. Under these two domain

areas lay a raft of focus areas in which Australian teachers must be able to demonstrate, at the very minimum, a graduate proficiency level. In relation to Indigenous education they are:

Professional Practice

1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Professional Engagement

2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (AITSL National Professional Standards for Teachers 2011)

In 2012 the authors, led by Dr Zane Ma Rhea, were contracted by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership to conduct a research project focussing on teachers already in the workforce as to how they may possibly meet these two focus areas. What the team found from the data was that, whilst there are many programs and initiatives operating in the sector, many are *ad hoc* and that a major teacher professional development program would need to be implemented for in-service teachers to be able to meet graduate level proficiency for the standards. As a direct outcome of this research, we the Indigenous education team in the Faculty of Education at Monash University are using the AITSL teacher professional standards as Graduate Attributes. A three-fold approach is taken to all Graduate Attributes. When discussing Indigenous education at a systems level we take an umbrella approach. What this means in practice is getting pre-service teachers to become aware of the policy that governs their day-to-day practice, in light of the findings from research undertaken for AITSL by Ma Rhea, Anderson, and Atkinson (2012). This research found that many teachers already in the work force do not have a working knowledge of policy informing Indigenous Education in Australia.

The systems level umbrella approach begins by introducing students to the following documents at an international level:

- The Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UN DRIPs);
- International Labour Organisation Convention No.169 (ILO 169).

By introducing students to these two documents, they have cognisance of the international thinking that should be informing much of the Indigenous Education policy in Australia. ILO 169 has a particular impact on students as this document specifically speaks to the economic rights of Indigenous peoples, and states that all Indigenous people have the right to an economically viable life free from governmental dependence. The second aspect of this approach is to make pre-service teachers aware of national policies that impact on their work. By creating an understanding of Federal level policy, teacher graduates are able to understand the federal government initiatives that aim to advance Indigenous student outcomes via various strategies and programs

funded at the federal level. The third aspect of the Graduate Attributes approach makes students aware of local policy. Students are required to identify various policy and programs initiatives at the state level. They are further required to be able to identify at the local level various local Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs), in order to localise curriculum in line with AITSL standards.

PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

Localisation of curriculum is one of the more important aspects of developing graduate level proficiency in our program. Ma Rhea, Anderson, and Atkinson (2012) identified the need and importance for teachers to be able to localise their curriculum through the development of strategic partnerships with local Indigenous Educational Consultative bodies (IECBs) who are the nationally recognised Indigenous knowledge holders of the expert education knowledge needed for teachers to develop curriculum. More often than not, many members of IECB networks are volunteers, interested parents and caregivers with the best interest of their child's education at heart.

Parents of Indigenous Australian students have a right and a desire to see that teachers graduating from universities are capable of teaching their children effectively, that they are able to equip Indigenous children with the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful, so that they are able to positively participate in society and enjoy the economic wealth of this country. Unfortunately, more often than not, this is not the case and it has been the parents, community, and culture shouldering the blame for the child's lack of educational success. After over two hundred years plus years of western education, many educators, communities and parents have come to realise that a contributing factor to the lack of Indigenous educational success lay within the classroom environment and ultimately the classroom teacher. The latest available Australian Bureau of Statistics data revealed that in 2011 there were 290,854 teachers in the workforce (ABS, 2011) many of whom have had little to no formal education in the teaching of Indigenous students or of the delivery of appropriate curriculum on Indigenous Australian culture in a positive manner. Specialist training in the field of Indigenous education needs to be endorsed and embedded by universities in order for graduates to be able to meet the AITSL professional standards as it relates to Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous parents and communities expect that graduating teachers be equipped with tools that enable them firstly to encourage high expectations from Indigenous learners. It is of the utmost importance that these graduating teachers not prescribe or fall victim to deficit theory models of education or what Rose has recently termed *educational ethnic profiling* (2012, p.75) that focus on the teachers' misconstrued and largely negative understanding of Indigenous students' cultural and intellectual backgrounds, often resulting in low academic expectations. Therefore, the blame of failure is never placed on the teacher or school that Indigenous students attend, but rather firmly with the individual student, their parents, their community, and ultimately their cultural background. Educational ethnic profiling has neither in the past nor in the

present actively encouraged or facilitated Indigenous children's parents and primary caregivers' ability to participate in the school system.

Parents also need to be confident that teachers are accepting of a student's Aboriginality and do not intend to "teach it out of them", something that all Indigenous people are sensitive to due to Australia's past assimilation policies that have touched all Indigenous Australians in one way or another. To have this forced upon Indigenous children as it was forced upon previous generations is to imply that all Indigenous people must aspire to the dominant white culture, that the white culture is better than the learners' Indigenous culture. Indigenous Australians understand that the dominant culture of this country is a white one, a foreign one, but that does not mean that they want to be white. Indigenous children go to school to gain an education so they can participate in all aspects of today's society, not to be turned into white Australians. Indigenous children know their identity and are strong and proud of their identity, and this needs to be acknowledged and supported by the schools and teachers, not devalued. Highlighted in the writings of Lester-Orbinna Rigney, who wrote of his own concerns when sending his daughter to her "first day of a white-controlled school" (Rigney, 2002) it was his concern that these schools have a tendency to "educate Nurrunga children out of a Nurrunga education" (Rigney, 2002). Accepting Indigenous people, culture, and lifeways wholeheartedly ensures that Indigenous children are able to form a positive sense of value and belonging to their school and school community. The provision of the best education Australia can provide is the catalyst for a child's dreams to become reality, to be able to participate in every aspect of society if they choose to do so and to be economically independent without the reliance on government assistance.

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES IN PRACTICE

Graduate teachers need to see Indigenous children as valued members of their classroom and school community. These learners bring with them a wealth of unique knowledge and life experience that contributes to the overall diversity and uniqueness of their school community. It is not only graduate teachers, but rather all teachers and educators, who must begin to recognise and identify Indigenous children as students FIRST, with the same thirst for knowledge as any other learner in their class, rather than seeing that their Aboriginality and the subconscious barriers it creates for the teacher. It is a held expectation by parents and caregivers of Indigenous children that graduate teachers have the ability to create a safe learning environment where Indigenous children are not made to feel culturally inferior. This may be accomplished by ensuring lessons are culturally sensitive and promote Indigenous culture in an intellectually positive manner that fosters pride in all. Teachers also need to have the skill to be academically discerning when developing Indigenous curriculum. They must be able to critically evaluate the myriad of resources available. Just on Google, for example, if one searches "Indigenous Australians", in 0.26 seconds approximately 9,120,000 results are retrieved. This is an enormous amount of data to analyse without having the academic skills to critically and confidently evaluate the content as to whether a source may or may not be credible.

The expectation is that teachers and principals will be able to demonstrate their capabilities and knowledge in two specific focus areas that relate to Indigenous Australians in the AITSL professional standards. What these standards are requiring of teachers are what parents and caregivers have been asking for! One can only contemplate why it has taken so long to be developed and to become an assessable expectation of all teachers. Thus it has never been more important for our graduate teachers at Monash University to be able to begin their careers with the necessary tools to teach non-Indigenous students effectively through a non-biased core knowledge base as it relates to Indigenous peoples and history, promoting topics such as reconciliation, as well as having a grounded pedagogical understanding of the learning needs of Indigenous children.

As previously mentioned there are two focus areas pertaining to Indigenous Australians. The specific skill set required to meet focus area 1.4 listed within the standards under the broad category *know students and how they learn* places the spotlight on the individual teacher's ability to be able to implement teaching strategies for Indigenous students that:

At the Graduate career stage, this Standard provides for new teachers to demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. (AITSL 2011, p. 9)

The second focus area 2.4 under know the content and how to teach it calls for teachers to be able to understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous:

At the Graduate career stage, this Standard provides for new teachers to demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages. (AITSL 2011, p.11)

Ma Rhea believes that these standards, in their design, will have the ability to support teachers to improve their teaching of Indigenous students and to be at the forefront of reconciliation efforts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of Australia (Ma Rhea, 2012). Recent dialogues with the IECB network representatives, Indigenous education workers, teachers and teacher educators also support this assertion. It can therefore be deemed a priority for university teacher education programs to realise the importance of these standards. If teachers are to adhere to these standards, universities must ensure that pre-service teachers are given the right tools to implement them. As it can only result in improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students and a greater awareness and respect from the non-Indigenous population in relation to Indigenous Australians, their history and culture, the outcome will surely be positive for Australian society as a whole.

CASE STUDY

Whilst both focus areas are of equal importance, this paper highlights how our student teachers showcase their ability to meet focus area 2.4 through the development of

culturally appropriate lesson plans. Our semester long unit, currently offered as an elective, involves students being exposed to a rights-based approach to Indigenous education and how that fits in within the individual student's teaching pedagogy and philosophy. When we speak of a rights-based approach to our students we are referring to such declarations as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN DRIPs), documents such as the International Labour Organization No 169 (ILO 169) which "is a legally binding international instrument open to ratification which deals specifically with the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples" (www.ilo.org) and how they relate to education and Indigenous peoples. A teacher who practices a rights-based approach to educating Indigenous students and/or non-Indigenous students about Indigenous histories ensures that lessons incorporate cultural rights and historical accuracy, and is effective in their cross-cultural competency. Other aspects of the delivery of our unit have the students gaining a greater awareness on how to deliver appropriate lessons, how to locate relevant and respectful resources, and how to implement teaching strategies that have been proven to assist Indigenous students in their learning.

Part of the evaluation of the pre-service teachers (students studying for a teaching degree in the Faculty of Education at Monash University) learning involves the development of a lesson plan in their particular area of expertise, for example English, Math or History, that incorporates an Indigenous issue or topic. Teachers in the Australian education system have been given a set of standards to meet (AITSL) but they are also having to comply with a new curriculum, the Australian Curriculum that identifies Indigenous Perspectives as a cross-curriculum priority (ACARA, 2012) based on the educational goals that are in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEEDCYA, 2008). The priorities identified include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and it is hoped that their incorporation across the curriculum will produce a greater knowledge and understanding amongst teachers, students and the wider community (ACARA, 2012).

Planning lessons that include an Indigenous perspective is not as difficult as it sounds. However it is still surprising the number of bemused, quizzical looks our students have when confronted with this task. These initial teachers, by the time they do our unit, should have had some practice in designing lesson plans, however that is not always the case as some of our students are completing their one-year Diploma of Education (Dip Ed) and the rest are Bachelor of Education students who are in their third or fourth year of their degree. The majority if not all of the students taking our unit have never even contemplated doing a plan that involved an Indigenous issue/context. Students are not restricted to a plan that concentrates solely on Indigenous Australians; they are informed from the beginning that Indigenous people are not just in Australia and therefore they may choose to do a lesson plan relating to other Indigenous groups worldwide. This our pre-service teachers of Language Other Than English (LOTE) eagerly take up, resulting in lessons plans concerning Indigenous people in Japan, Canada and so on.

By the completion of the task, it is remarkable the level of work many students have undertaken to ensure they meet the criteria and present a worthwhile lesson plan. From the 100 odd plans that have crossed our desks in the last 7 years there have been only a few that have impressed us in the ability of the student to meet the set criteria. This is especially so for the criteria relating to the ability to demonstrate a genuine sensitivity and understanding towards Indigenous Australian culture and ensuring relevant Indigenous expertise was used in the development of their plan, which we feel are two important criteria to meet when designing a plan that has an Indigenous context. One commendable example was a lesson plan where our trainee teacher showed their willingness to engage not only with the task at hand but also with the Indigenous community, in a respectful manner that would have their students, in this idealised lesson plan, having a healthy and respectful understanding of one Indigenous Australian group's dance and music. To satisfy the criteria for this assessment, pre-service teachers in the unit are required to incorporate an aspect of Indigenous culture or an Indigenous perspective of relevance to the lesson. In this case, the pre-service teacher, who is studying to become a primary school teacher, wrote a plan relevant for a class of 25 year 4's. The subject of the plan was Indigenous Australian music and dance specifically relating to the Mununjali community whose traditional lands are in Queensland, Australia. Within the plan, pre-teachers are also required to identify a clear learning outcome with again the focus on an Indigenous issue. The pre-service teacher had identified that by the conclusion of the lesson students will have been exposed to one style of traditional Indigenous Australian dance and music and been able to develop their own unique dance. It was not the intention that the students 'copy' the Indigenous dance, which the pre-service teacher had stated several times in the plan and its justification. This showed their own understanding of the respect one should show in matters such as this. Students in their class would also have gained an appreciation and understanding of that Indigenous group's dance style, why they danced that particular dance and why their bodies were painted that particular way; they were also taught about who was allowed to do this dance and why.

The lesson plan also provided evidence that the student had understanding and a sensitivity towards Indigenous culture and knowledge throughout by their inclusion in the plan of provision to have an Indigenous person assist with the lesson, one who either comes from the group who 'own' the dance or has the permission to do so. For far too long, non-Indigenous people have spoken about and for Indigenous Australians. This is no longer necessary or appropriate as there are plenty of Indigenous people who are able to quite confidently speak for themselves and about THEIR culture, therefore teachers should be seeking knowledgeable Indigenous people to join them in the classrooms when teaching Indigenous aspects. The pre-service teacher in question showed that the plan had demonstrated relevance to issues that Indigenous people face by including videos and correct information relating to the particular dance, as well as maps to enable students to 'see' where the dance and the group came from, which allows for students to gain a better insight into the lesson and its subject matter. Finally they also met the criteria of showing that relevant Indigenous expertise had been

utilised in the preparation of their plan by not just finding a name or an organisation and including it within their plan, but actually going that step further and contacting the resource to ensure their relevance for their lesson plan. It is also worthwhile to note that the pre-service teacher also consulted with this resource to make sure that they had shown correct respect and understanding within their lesson plan. This pre-service teacher also obtained permission from the Mununjali dance group to show the video to their class and proceed with their lesson even though the video was available in the public domain, which shows their commitment to their understanding and sensitivity towards Indigenous culture and knowledge. From the information received in our class and subsequent readings, the pre-service teacher took it all on board and put it into practice with the understanding that the proper and respectful way to incorporate Indigenous art and music in their classrooms would be to ensure that they spoke to the relevant community and also to have an Elder or Indigenous person of knowledge present in the classroom. In doing this, they (the teacher) would be able to learn what would be appropriate and what wouldn't be.

Their aim of the lesson was not to have students replicate any dance or art they saw in the video but to firstly become more aware of the Indigenous culture in Australia and be able to appreciate and respect it, and then for the students to create their own unique dance and art. They also wanted students to be aware that the Indigenous art form that was being presented to them is expert and highly valued in the relevant community it comes from and that the dance being presented to them was of a sacred nature to this community and was to be explained with much respect and emphasised to the children that the dance was not to be copied in any way. This pre-service teacher also took it upon himself or herself to presume that there may be Indigenous students in the class and structured their lesson in a form that could suit such students. Ensuring not to force students to peer evaluate if they did not want the peer evaluation and also ensuring that the peer evaluation was seen not as judging but as feedback, and allowing this feedback to be given as anonymous written feedback again shows their awareness of teaching strategies that could be applied to Indigenous students. And whilst this pre-service teacher admits that it is a generalisation that Indigenous students enjoy working in small groups, they adapted the lesson to enable the students to break off into these groups. This pre-service teacher has shown that by taking on the knowledge gained in this unit alongside the required readings, one can incorporate Indigenous cultural aspects and knowledge respectfully and appropriately in a lesson plan. This can then result in students becoming more aware and appreciative of Indigenous culture, art, and lifestyles in a positive manner. Whilst this is only one of the assessment items our pre-service teachers submit, it shows that with experiences of developing their own lesson plans that have an Indigenous context, combined with the areas covered within the unit, pre-service teachers do gain a greater understanding of what is expected of them in relation to Indigenous students. This then gives them the confidence and know-how to conduct lessons that are meeting Indigenous parents and caregivers expectations, showing Indigenous students that they and their culture and history are valued within the class. This also conveys knowledge in a positive

manner to the non-Indigenous students, which should then promote reconciliation and give them a healthy understanding of Indigenous Australians and the history of this country. This shows how our unit, with assessments based around the development of culturally appropriate and safe lesson plans such as the above mentioned, equip our student teachers with a good solid grounding in being able to meet the graduate level of the AITSL focus area 2.4. And whilst this paper has concentrated on showing you how we enable our students to meet this particular focus area requirement, we also do spend time with our students on focus area 1.4, exposing them to teaching strategies they can use in their classrooms for Indigenous students. Thus, we give them the tools to encourage better educational outcomes for our Indigenous children while also giving them the grounding to be able to promote reconciliation and to teach about Indigenous history to all students in a respectful manner.

CONCLUSION

As we have discussed, this is a relatively new approach to ensuring the successful educational outcomes of Indigenous students. What we firmly believe is that by identifying the need for Graduate Attributes relating to the provision of Indigenous education, we are able successfully to engage non-Indigenous pre-service teachers in a way that has not previously been done in Australian teacher education. By identifying Indigenous education as a specialist teaching method and taking it out of the realm socio-historical studies, pre-service teachers are given the confidence to be able to engage with Indigenous peoples and communities via successful and meaning partnerships. There is much future work to be done in the development of evidence-based teaching strategies for pre-service teachers, but using the concept of Graduate Attributes as discussed in this paper we believe is a step in the right direction.

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