

# Indigenous creativities, the Australian Curriculum, and pre-service teachers

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*This research reports the impact of changes made to an Arts education module in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures within a Bachelor of Education degree, and the learning and experience of pre-service teachers in response to these changes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music and visual arts making was presented in the module as rich and abundant material to be reflected on and introduced in the classroom. The authors showcased the transformative possibilities for pre-service teachers of studying, reflecting on, and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts practises. The authors who crafted the module regarded it as a way to encourage two-way (or both ways) learning in which the celebration of Aboriginal creative knowledges in teaching was encouraged. Pre-service teachers were surveyed, interviewed, and asked to reflect on their exposure to Aboriginal music and visual arts in their learning. The research mapped the growth in respect and understandings that studying Aboriginal arts and Torres Strait Islander creativities developed in pre-service teachers. The research showcased visual arts making from non-Aboriginal students that was produced in response to Aboriginal music and that demonstrated high levels of empathy and understanding.*

*Keywords: Pre-service teacher education; in-service teacher education; ITE; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; cross curricular priorities; general capabilities; music and visual arts education; Australian curriculum; early years learning framework; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creativities; two-way learning*

## INTRODUCTION

This research reports the impact of changes made to an Arts education module in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures within a Bachelor of Education degree, and the learning and experience of pre-service teachers in response to these changes. The module was one of three in the unit. Using analysis of survey and interview data completed by pre-service teachers and examples of their visual arts making, this article shines a light on the possibilities of teaching through and with Aboriginal perspectives and arts practise. The study of music and visual arts written and created by Aboriginal musicians and artists encouraged students to self-report on their increased knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and the impact these had on their confidence to deliver Cross Curricular Priorities in the Australian Curriculum (2018) and in the Early Years Learning Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

Tasmania has a population of 509,965 of whom 23,572 (4.6%) identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, with a Eurocentric mix of ancestries including English, Australian, Irish, Scottish, and German (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Undergraduate programs in teaching and education at the University of Tasmania have very few international student enrolments and thus are representative of the wider Tasmanian demographic. In 2011, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) introduced the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, with Standards 1.4 and 2.4 requiring graduate teachers to be competent in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2018). Also, in 2011 the newly-developed *Australian Curriculum* introduced the “Cross Curriculum Priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures” (Australian Curriculum, 2018) for inclusion in all primary and secondary classrooms in Australia. One year earlier, in 2010, for birth to 5-year-old children, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) also introduced guidance for educators around competence in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in early learning. According to Hudson, Hudson, Weatherby-Fell, and Shipway (2016) “30% or more of preservice teachers . . . [indicated] they lacked confidence to . . . demonstrate understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ (p. 135). When coupled with Tasmania’s homogenous, Eurocentric demographic, the need for pre-service teacher training in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is clear (see also Andersen, 2012; and, Taylor, 2014). The module that is the basis of this article, while not a mandatory cultural awareness unit (this occurs in the third year of the degree), seeks to use Aboriginal creativities to expose pre-service teachers to this critical, yet challenging area of the curriculum (Aveling, 2006; Kameniar, Windsor, & Sifa, 2014; O’Dowd, 2010; Thorpe & Burgess, 2016).

The term *palawa* is used to refer to the Tasmanian Aboriginal People in this article. The present-day *palawa* population is largely descended from a small number of women who were stolen by or traded to white sealers in the early 1800s. Apart from this official population, there are believed to be other families who have descended from unions between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men who lived in isolated rural districts of Tasmania. Official records establish that there were three distinct groups of *palawa* who formed large families and constituted the contemporary *palawa* community: original families born in the Bass Strait islands; families of Dalrymple Johnson who were born in the islands and later lived on the North-West coast; and the families of Fanny Cochrane-Smith who lived in the Channel district, south of Hobart in 1905.

## **BACKGROUND**

In 2016/2017, the authors embarked on a journey to develop a rich and abundant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander module within an Arts education unit for first-year Bachelor of Education students. The re-conceptualization of the module was informed by earlier consultations with Tasmanian Aboriginal educator, Theresa Sainty, and by formal student feedback and peer reviews. Following future iterations, the module will continue to be reflected on and re-modelled through feedback and data analysis. This unit was taught in face-to-face mode in Launceston and Burnie and in fully online mode, and it had a total of 163 students enrolled in semester 2, 2017, with 84 of these enrolled fully online. It was decided to focus data collection on the fully online cohort as this research was nested within a broader project around pre-service teacher education in online spaces.

The pedagogy employed throughout this unit was “action learning” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2), requiring learners to engage in higher order thinking and to both “do” and “reflect.” Pre-

service teachers were required to complete weekly learning activities, such as singing a rhyme or painting a response, and to reflect on these with reference to the curriculum (the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum), and the classroom or childcare centre (implementation).

The intention of this unit was to encourage pre-service teachers to engage with the Cross-Curriculum Priorities of “Sustainability” and “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures” (Modules 1 and 2), and the “General Capability of Literacy” (Module 3) while simultaneously developing confidence in using music and visual arts as pedagogical tools. The length of the unit was problematic as each module only lasted for 12 contact hours over a 3-week period and, furthermore, pre-service teachers would not complete a dedicated unit on Cultural Awareness until third year; thus, this unit was their first encounter with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Through music and visual arts, the researchers sought to assist pre-service teachers to: engage with the key concepts and organizing ideas of the “Cross Curriculum Priority,” understand the critical concepts of Country and story, begin to understand the impact of colonization on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to apply a process of critical discernment in planning for these to be applied in their future teaching.

The researchers used the conceptual framework for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures and the key concepts of “Living Communities” (Australian Curriculum, 2018) and “Country/Place” (Rose, 1986, p. 7) to frame content and pedagogy redesign. The redesign also enabled pre-service teachers to address one of the two pertinent graduate level standards in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2018): Standard 2.4, asking graduates to “demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages,” was explicitly included, taught, and assessed through this module. The foregrounding of the concept of Country occurred through actively engaging with Aboriginal songs such as “Took The Children Away” by Australian Aboriginal artist and member of the Stolen Generations, Archie Roach (1990). It was hoped that an exploration of the narrative of Archie’s own forced separation from his parents through the poignant lyrics of this song enabled pre-service teachers to examine this shameful period of Australian history, and to reflect on its application to classroom learning.

The song, *Songlines of the Moonbird*, (based on the work of respected Tasmanian Elder and academic Japanangka Errol West) and written by *palawa* artists Dyan and Ronnie Summers, was presented in the module as material to be reflected upon, celebrated, and used in classrooms. Aboriginal creative practise was used as a tool to encourage learning and teaching that iterated both ways, or two-way learning (Harris, 1990) where cultural understanding was prioritized and teachers viewed Aboriginal cultures and histories without deficit. The authors wanted to share Aboriginal music and visual arts practises with pre-service teachers and develop their knowledge of and exposure to Aboriginal creative literacies. They wanted to lead the students from the unknown to the known through active learning in the creative arts. The unit foregrounded contemporary Aboriginal creativities and the digital space was an ideal mode for pre-service teachers to listen to Aboriginal music and view Aboriginal art. Studying, reflecting on, and responding to Aboriginal songs and art was a useful tool that encouraged pre-service teachers to develop their understandings of Aboriginal histories and cultures.

The authors wanted students to have the opportunity to access, discuss and respond to Aboriginal creativities in a variety of different ways: through song, through image making, and through reflection on story. They compiled lists of artists and musicians whose work they found

impactful and started researching visual artists whose work would enable pre-service teachers to understand Aboriginal expressions of Country and story. The selection of music and art to be included in the module was informed by three parameters: feature Tasmanian Aboriginal artists (although not exclusively); could in some way be engaged with actively by students through singing or playing; and, enabled learning in key aspects of the Cross-Curriculum Priority such as the Stolen Generations and the Wik decision, or to the concept of living communities or Country/place. The work of two Tasmanian visual artists, Aunty Lola Greeno and Ricky Maynard, were included. Aunty Lola Greeno continues a tradition of art making that involves creating shell necklaces using shells from the North of Tasmania, enabling a conversation about Country. Photographer Ricky Maynard produced a series of portraits of the Wik people Elders entitled “Returning to places that name us,” enabling learning about native title and the Wik decision. Music by Tasmanian Elders Dyan and Ronnie Summers was selected because they speak to a living community and to the concept of song lines. The music of Tasmanian Dewayne Everett smith entitled “milaythina” was selected because it was the first song written in Tasmanian *Palawa Kani* since the recordings of Fanny Cochrane Smith from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the work of Archie Roach was selected because it storied personal experiences of the stolen generations.

The assessment for this module asked pre-service teachers to explore deep understandings of the concepts of “Country” and “story”, and the impact of the Stolen Generations through singing and playing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander songs. Pre-service teachers also explored these concepts by responding to artworks such as those of Ricky Maynard and Aunty Lola Greeno. The assessment for this module required students to respond to the musical creations of a colleague that were recorded and placed on a discussion board, asking them to use these as inspiration for their own visual creative response by drawing a mind map. This assessment task encouraged authentic peer to peer learning, peer support and conversations, outcomes that are entirely consistent with a highly social online learning environment likely to encourage student engagement (Brindley, Walti, & Blashke, 2009) and active learning.

The practice of teaching Aboriginal culture alongside Western disciplines was promoted during the 1980s and developed by Aboriginal teacher trainees such as Mandaway Yunupingu and Nalwarri Ngurruwutthun. During the 1990s, Harris developed the term “two-way schooling to communicate learning that draws on two different fields of knowledge” (Harris, 1990). The pedagogy is described as:

A strategy to help make the matter of choice real in both worlds; to provide the opportunity for the primary Aboriginal identity to stay strong, though changing and thus continue to be the source of inner strength and security necessary for dealing with the western World. (p. 48)

It has been argued that these domains cannot be kept separate: “Reconciliation is not about the resolution or dissolving of differences, rather in our conception, it proposes a productive, hopeful space for an imperfect, agonistic and ongoing dialogue” (Ahluwalia, Atkinson, Bishop, Christie, Hattam & Matthews, 2012 p. 2). It has been suggested (Craven, 1999) that early career teachers, in particular, need to be encouraged to create tools for knowledge sharing that reinforce a sense of relatedness and community for Aboriginal students; the exposure in this module embedded this approach through creative activities for students. The authors’ unit acknowledged Martin’s Relatedness theory (Martin, 2003) and its focus on three processes: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing. The module included learning activities that encouraged pre-service teachers to explore their own ideas of Ways of Creative Knowing through making Art.

It was hoped that the resources and assessment used in this module would enable the authors to address deficit stances. The deficit model emerged as an academic theory in the 1960s and was based on the idea that lower achievement in schools arises from issues with the students rather than the teachers, teaching, or the school itself (Irizarry, 2009). The deficit model has impacted Aboriginal students because of the lower expectations some teachers apply to their learning and achievements. Through this research, the authors wanted to find out if studying, reflecting on, and listening to Aboriginal art and music could shift pre-service teachers from non-Aboriginal backgrounds from taking deficit stances in their learning. During the last two decades, researchers in Aboriginal education have presented the notion that when teachers do not share the socio-cultural backgrounds of their students, they are less able to apply principles of cultural inclusivity (Craven, 1999; Fanshaw, 1999; Foley 1999a, b; Harrison, 2008; Malin, 1990a, b; Malin & Maidment, 2003; Martin, 2003; Partington, 1998). It has been suggested that improved teacher training for all pre-service teachers could assist the shift away from teachers unwittingly perpetuating racist, stereotyped attitudes in their classrooms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research project took place within a larger Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) project being undertaken into the impact of the re-development of this unit on student experience and learning. During data analysis, the quality and quantity of data with reference to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander module became clear and, consequently, author 1 joined the project. The broader research project was designed parallel to the unit and ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network.

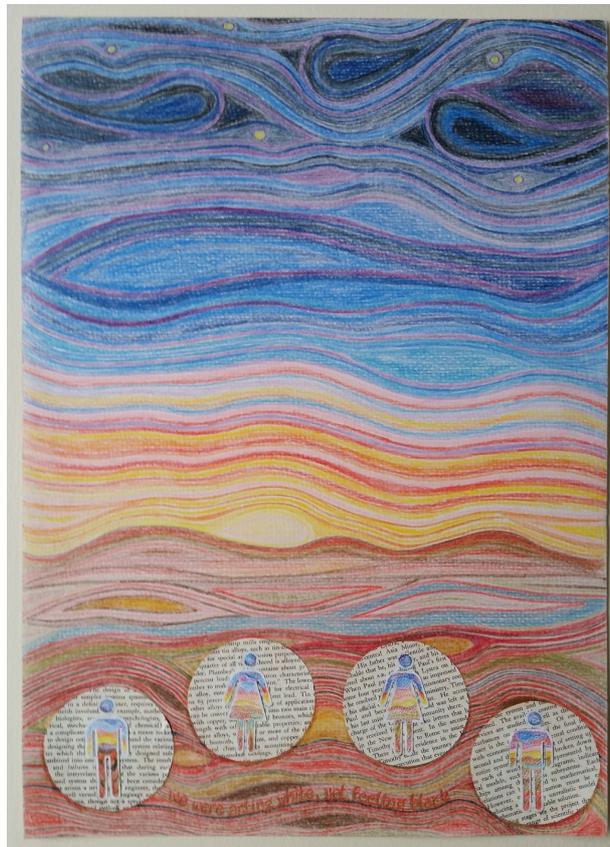
The project included two stages: 1) surveys, and 2) semi-structured interviews. Following the completion of each of the three modules, students were invited by email to complete a survey of their learning and experience. Details of participation were included in the email along with a SurveyMonkey link to each module survey. Questions included a mix of closed questions with Likert scale responses, ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent, to those that included open ended responses. Questions sought to establish respondent perceptions of changes in their own knowledge and beliefs. For example, one question asked, “I rate my understanding of the Cross-Curriculum Priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures before starting this unit as...”; and, another asked “I rate my understanding of the Cross-Curriculum Priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures after completing this module as....” Both these questions included an opportunity for qualitative elaboration on the Likert response. Data were also sought about possible reasons for any change, with further questions about assessment, peer discussion and the role of tutors being asked. In total, 1 of the 37 survey responses were received from 84 potential respondents, a response rate of 44%.

Following completion of the survey, respondents were invited to participate in an interview, and seven students agreed to participate in this. Of these, an interview time could not be arranged with one subject, and one subject completed the interview but did not member-check their transcript. Thus, five interviews were analysed. Audio-recorded interviews took place between December 2017 and April 2018 using an online web room. Interviews were transcribed and sent to subjects for their approval. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic process (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) that uses large Excel matrices to code and search data for meaning. The survey and interview data were entered into these sheets and treated as one corpus for analysis. A process ensued in which data were read and re-read with

units being allocated to evolving, tentative codes and finally to broader themes. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

## DATA

The impact of the unit on student learning and experience was excellent. Overall, 27% (n=10) of survey respondents indicated that they rated their entry level understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as “Excellent” “Very Good” or “Good”. By the conclusion of this module 97% (n=36) responded that their “understanding about the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures” was “Excellent” “Very Good” or “Good”. This is a remarkable turnaround in self-reported levels of understanding—an improvement of over 300%. Does this turnaround speak to the pedagogy and content of the unit and to the low levels of understanding at the commencement of the unit and generally in the broader community? One survey respondent reflected on the value of this module to their learning, writing that the links to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were “incredibly clear and done in a way that was respectful to these cultures and enabled us to understand how to approach and incorporate these histories and cultures into our own teaching” (Respondent 1). Respondent 36 rated their entry level of understanding as “unsatisfactory” also wrote that “I have very little experience in this area and don’t remember learning much about it during school.” This respondent rated their finishing understanding as “good” and emphasized the desire to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, explaining: “I have learnt a fair bit, but more importantly I am now open to discovering more and learning more myself beyond this unit. I can see the value in understanding this topic.”



**Image 1: Visual Response to Took the Children Away - Lara.**

Lara chose to respond to her partner's engagement with Archie Roach's *Took the Children Away* (Roach, 1990) with Image 1. Her visual response demonstrated a deep and authentic engagement with Aboriginal histories of dispossession and trauma. Lara highlighted the dissonance experienced by many of the Stolen Generations and focussed on the lyric "acting white, but feeling black" (Roach, 1990). By creating an art work that responded to the themes of the song, Lara's deep thinking was actualized and her art making assisted and in turn demonstrated her understandings.



**Image 2: Visual Response to Took the Children Away - Rebekah.**

Rebekah chose to respond to "Took the Children Away" through collage (Image 2). This response represented deep empathy and engagement in the issues communicated by this anthemic song. Rebekah highlighted words such as "invasion" and created a grid in which images of children are shown depicted in lines, or "rounded up." The children are disempowered. They do not play, nor engage with each other but peer out through fences and engage the viewer with their melancholy. Rebekah has worked the words "brother," "sister," and "land" into the collage through painterly layers that remind us of graffiti and her work is powerful and emotive. Red is used as a strong contrast colour, emphasizing the split heart and the bleeding land. The red heart hovers menacingly over the four black stick figures and the yellow cross de-identifies the huddled children.

Rebekah reflected on the importance of this task during her interview with Author 2, stating:

I really loved . . . knowing what you can and can't teach in the classroom. I found that very useful and helpful, as I didn't even know myself . . . until this class and now I'm doing "Cultural Awareness" [a third year Bachelor of Education unit] it's actually helping me in that subject.

Author 2: So, is that something that you feel you could include in your class now with some confidence?

Rebekah: Yeah definitely.

Later in the interview Rebekah reflected that it was the music component that was critical for her, stating that “music has sort of been a thing to open me up to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories.” This was just a starting point for Rebekah, and about six months after completing the unit, Author 2 received the email below from her:

Hi...I am currently on prac and I am currently setting up some lessons around early explorers, convicts and the conflict between the Europeans and Aboriginals. The children have grasped the concept of children being taken away by the Europeans. So, you would be pleased to know I am going to use Archie Roach's song - Took the children away [sic.] and ask the children to pick up the key words within the song to draw a mind map. (Email, received 21 August 2018)

One of the critical issues faced by the authors in the module was perceived resistance to reflective practice. Deborah was a mature-aged student working as a teacher’s assistant in a primary school where, according to her, between 30% and 40% of the enrolled students identified as Aboriginal. Despite the high Aboriginal enrolment, she stated that she did not find any part of the module relevant. She described it as “tedious” and replied when probed about the relevance of the subject: “No, there wasn’t one piece. I didn’t find it relevant.” Deborah may have accepted and perpetuated her deficit thinking or she may have lacked interest in the module for another reason. She may have lacked confidence in her skillset as a visual artist or been hesitant to listen to the Archie Roach song because she feared negative impact on the students in her classroom.

Deborah spoke about being stigmatized by the acknowledgment of Country in her school and stated that “I still find as a person I should not have to apologise . . . um . . . for what’s happened in the past. I haven’t committed it. I haven’t done it.” Deborah shifted the responsibility for engaging and suggested that another teacher would have to tell the story of the Stolen Generations in the classroom. She stepped away from all responsibility with her dismissive comments, “It was good to listen to, but somebody probably would try to figure out how they would do it.” She reasoned that “Just because I found it probably a bit confronting.” Perhaps Deborah lacked the confidence to engage with the histories and stories presented, or perhaps she wanted to distance herself from the apology. Perhaps she found it difficult to understand why she was uncomfortable.

Deborah claimed that even if she was required to teach the truth about the history of colonization and the Stolen Generations that she would resist it, stating “if I had to teach that in a class I probably wouldn’t, and I would switch it to something.” Her interview suggested that she felt blame whilst listening to the music: “I don’t know if it’s something I probably assumed for myself [blame] by listening to it.” Deborah stated that she would not teach students anything that made her feel uncomfortable or confronted. In reflecting on the Archie Roach song, Deborah stated, “I’m not going to teach that because I feel uncomfortable with it.” In the interview, Deborah laughed about the effort that she placed into listening and working with the Archie Roach song studied within the unit:

I don’t think that I actually did any work on that piece at all, it wasn’t one that I selected. Just because I hate to see what I actually drew from it. (Laughs). That wouldn’t have been very nice at all. But I tend to focus on something that is a little bit more positive.

Deborah may have held views that regarded Aboriginal studies to be only relevant to Aboriginal students, demonstrating a cultural deficit stance (Trueba, 1988). Indeed, she commented that at the school where she was a teacher assistant:

[W]e do a lot of Aboriginal studies in our class or in our school as a whole. We've had cultural studies for the last three years. They don't mind their kids learning about it, but every class has one session a week on purely Aboriginal studies.

In contrast, Anita stated that she particularly enjoyed studying and reflecting on the music embedded in the module and emphasized: "I was really interested by (it) because I'd never really looked into or was exposed to that sort of thing." Furthermore, she committed to further research and mindfully transitioned from unknowing to the known. In her interview, she described this process and explained: "So I really enjoyed learning about that and I found I went and did my own research into it. As we were doing it I found out a little more." She gave insights into the deep learning behind her actions with her statement: "You got to learn more about the community and arts part of their culture."

Anita did not resist the notion of teaching Aboriginal histories in her future teaching and affirmed the importance of Aboriginal perspectives for non-Aboriginal students stating: "I feel like it would be good for them to be exposed to from an early age." She remarked that "being exposed to that . . . and to give my own students a different approach to it, to what is" was her main goal.

## CONCLUSION

This article has reported on the impact on pre-service teachers of a thoughtfully constructed module in Arts education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures. This research has enabled the impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures module within an Arts education unit to be evaluated, considered and discussed. The data corpus analysed in this research revealed pre-service teachers reported mostly positive learning and experiences, and the desire to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their future classrooms. This research also noted a cultural deficit stance maintained by one participant.

While the authors acknowledge the limitations of self-reporting, and the relatively low number of participants, the findings of this qualitative study does shed some light on the possibilities of "active" Arts rich learning to encourage students to engage with and better understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. The student experience was heard, discussed, and explored. Participant art works and comments communicated the impact of studying Aboriginal creativities.

This article has presented the impact and value of studying, reflecting on, and responding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creativities for pre-service teachers. It reflects on the value of learning through Aboriginal Arts for non-Aboriginal pre-service teachers and it emphasizes positive pedagogies and ways in which the understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures can be encouraged within classrooms. It shines a light on some of the ways in which modules in pre-service teacher training can be constructed to encourage respect, both ways learning (Harris, 1990), and improved understandings of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross-Curriculum Priority* and the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

## GLOSSARY

### **Aboriginal**

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the

community in which he (she) lives (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981, cited in Gardiner-Garden, 2000).

### **Indigenous**

The word Indigenous is commonly used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this study, the term Aboriginal is used.

### **Two-way learning**

This term is interchangeable with ‘both ways learning’ and describes the mixing of Western and Aboriginal knowledges in teaching (Harris, 1990).

### **Whiteness**

Refers to the unacknowledged position of unearned privilege that ‘white’ people have occupied in countries such as Australia, UK and the US.

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