

Cultural safety and community engagement

- 3.1 It is important for all human beings, no matter what stage of life, to feel a sense of belonging to a group or clan. Whether they choose to identify as Catholic or Jewish, European or Asian, bookworm or adrenalin seeker, individuals feel a sense of pride and belonging when with peers. Throughout the inquiry it became very clear that many Indigenous students do not feel this sense of belonging when at school. This is because they attend schools that do not accept the relevance of, or acknowledge, understand or celebrate their culture, which results in children not feeling culturally safe.
- 3.2 This lack of cultural safety brought into sharp contrast some of the key differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences of school. It highlighted the ways in which schools and the education system need to adapt and work together with Indigenous students, parents, carers and communities to ensure that students receive support to overcome these challenges and achieve their potential.
- 3.3 This chapter considers some of the challenges that many Indigenous students face throughout their education and explores the key elements of culturally safe environments and the importance of teaching through language and culture.

Cultural safety

- 3.4 Throughout the inquiry, it was very clear that cultural safety fostered by a strong connection and engagement with community was the essential foundation upon which all successful education and support programs were built. A number of submissions emphasised the importance of cultural safety, noting that school environments that support and celebrate

Indigenous cultures and identity have a marked impact on attendance, engagement, and education outcomes.¹ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner defines cultural safety as:

An environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening.²

3.5 Dr William Fogarty, Senior Research Fellow, Australian National University, explained the problems that arise when students do not feel culturally safe at school:

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in remote Australia, face a great and deep dilemma in engaging with the current education system. On the one hand, education can be a pathway to social mobility and can offer great economic returns and education can be the key to alleviating social disadvantage. In this way education can be empowering. However, education that does not allow for learning in your own language and that is not inclusive of your social, cultural or economic values is not empowering; it is disempowering.³

3.6 A strong connection and engagement with a student's parents and community is essential to encouraging school attendance. Mr Darren Godwell, Chief Executive Officer, Stronger Smarter, explained that poor attendance can be:

[...] a lag indicator of the level of confidence that students have in both the teacher and going to that classroom. It is also a lag indicator of the level of confidence the parents have in the school

¹ For example: Australian Education Union, *Submission 45*, 44th Parliament; Wongutha CAPS, *Submission 37*, 44th Parliament; Reconciliation Victoria, *Submission 48*, 44th Parliament; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Supplementary Submission 46.1*, 44th Parliament; Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle, *Submission 15*, 44th Parliament; Assistant Professor Dr Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44th Parliament; Cape York Partnership, *Submission 55*, 44th Parliament; Professor Jeannie Herbert AM, *Submission 8*, 44th Parliament; Reconciliation Australia, *Submission 36*, 44th Parliament; National Rural Health Student Network, *Submission 54*, 44th Parliament; CIT Yurauna Centre & Northside Community Service, *Submission 10*, 45th Parliament; Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, *Submission 18*, 45th Parliament; Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45th Parliament; Yirara College, *Submission 33*, 45th Parliament; and Kon and Shoba Kalos, *Submission 15*, 45th Parliament.

² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social Justice Report 2011*, p. 123.

³ Dr William Fogarty, Senior Research Fellow, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 16 March 2016, p. 2.

and the trust they have in those educators to send their children there.⁴

- 3.7 When considering poor parental and community engagement, schools and school programs must be cognisant that many parents and members of Indigenous communities were traumatised by their own experiences of the education system, because they did not feel safe or welcome in their school environment. Professor Bob Morgan, International Engagement Officer, University of Newcastle explained that:

I do not think you can look simplistically at the lack of community engagement and say that parents are not concerned about their kids' education. It is not as simple as that.

We have to be smart enough to know how to better engage the parents in the learning experience of our kids. That is a totally different exercise from just saying that our parents are not engaged. I cannot stress enough that we need to change our thinking about the way we perceive education and the relative role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids in the systems.⁵

- 3.8 Schools must, therefore, not only work to provide culturally safe spaces for students, but also for their families. Mr Mitchell Dahlstrom, former National Indigenous Youth Parliamentarian, told the committee that the cultural centre at his school assists in engaging Indigenous parents. He stated that:

Whenever Indigenous parents came in to have meetings, it was a nice space to go into. Although it was in the school, it was not in a classroom. I think classrooms feel like they belong to the teachers, so you are going into their territory; whereas, when you go into a space like that, it is sort of a more level playing field for everybody that is involved in the discussion.⁶

- 3.9 Professor Peter Buckskin, Dean, University of South Australia, explained:

Holding culturally safe spaces in schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to meet and hold meetings within the school is also paramount.⁷

⁴ Mr Darren Godwell, Chief Executive Officer, Stronger Smarter Institute, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 5 February 2016, p. 3.

⁵ Professor Bob Morgan, International Engagement Officer, Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle, *Committee Hansard*, Newcastle, 21 March 2016, p. 4.

⁶ Mr Mitchell Dahlstrom, Former National Indigenous Youth Parliamentarian, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 26 May 2017, p. 11.

⁷ Professor Peter Buckskin, Dean of Indigenous Scholarship, Engagement and Research, University of South Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 17 March 2016, p. 2.

- 3.10 Particularly in remote communities, schools are important facilities for the entire community. The benefits of providing a culturally safe school environment extend far beyond a child's schooling years. For example, it has been found that schools being culturally unsafe for students and the community can have consequential impacts on adult civic engagement.
- 3.11 The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into the conduct of the 2013 Federal election, heard evidence that the negative experiences that some Indigenous adults had with schools, both as students and parents, meant that the choice of schools as polling places acted as a significant deterrent to voting.⁸
- 3.12 Across Australia, state and territory governments have various policies and guidance to assist schools to create culturally safe environments.
- 3.13 One of the most comprehensive policies has been put in place by the Western Australian Government. In 2015, the Western Australia Department of Education and Training launched its Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework, which 'sets expected standards for staff when working with Aboriginal students, their families and communities'.⁹ From 2017, schools are 'expected to use self-assessment against the framework in school improvement planning'.¹⁰
- 3.14 The Framework sets out cultural standards, together with performance descriptors and indicators for each standard. There is also a continuum against which schools can reflect on individual and whole-school progress and develop strategies to move towards becoming culturally responsive. The continuum comprises four stages:
- **cultural awareness:** the recognition of differences and similarities between cultural groups;
 - **cultural understanding:** representing a shift in emphasis from awareness to behaviours and attitudes;
 - **cultural competence:** the ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively and sensitively with people from a cultural background that is different to one's own; and
 - **cultural responsiveness:** the ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively and sensitively with people from a cultural

⁸ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *The 2013 Federal Election*, April 2015, pp. 110-112.

⁹ Western Australia Department of Education, *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework*, 2015, p. 3.

¹⁰ Western Australia Department of Education, 'Aboriginal Education', <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/aboriginaleducation/detcms/navigation/aboriginal-education/>, accessed 6 September 2017.

background that is different to one's own, and demonstrating this ability with proficiency.¹¹

- 3.15 The committee noted that the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework still allowed for flexibility and responsiveness to individual communities. This is an important point of connection with community, with many submissions noting that a 'one-size-fits-all' policy approach to improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students does not work.¹²

Committee comment

- 3.16 All students have a right to feel safe, included, valued, and supported at school. All Australian schools, regardless of the number of Indigenous students enrolled, should provide culturally safe environments for students.
- 3.17 The evidence clearly demonstrated that cultural safety, fostered by strong connection and engagement with community, is the essential foundation upon which all educational and support programs must be built in order to succeed.
- 3.18 Throughout the inquiry, the committee saw and heard from a number of programs supporting student attendance and achievement. The common elements present in all of the successful programs were flexibility, cultural safety, buy-in from the family and connection with community. Strong relationships between students, families, teachers, schools, health services, and communities are vital. Time and again it has been shown that, without a foundation of cultural safety and strong connections, any program, no matter its funding or resources, will fail.
- 3.19 The committee was impressed by the Western Australia Department of Education and Training's Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework and commends it to other states and territories. It details a clear continuum against which schools and teachers can measure their progress and provides an element of accountability.

¹¹ Western Australia Department of Education, *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework*, 2015, p. 16.

¹² For example: Ninti One, *Submission 6*, 44th Parliament, p. 5; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Supplementary Submission 46.1*, 44th Parliament, p. [7]; Northern Territory Christian Schools, *Submission 27*, 44th Parliament, p. 2; Smith Family, *Submission 44*, 44th Parliament, p. 7; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 20*, 44th Parliament, p. 5; Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45th Parliament, pp. 3-7; and Dr Maryanne Macdonald, *Submission 11*, 45th Parliament, p. 16.

Teaching through culture

3.20 Dr Christopher Matthews, Chair, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance, emphasised the importance of 'teaching in a way that utilises...cultural understanding'. He told the committee that students are often expected to memorise and regurgitate information without any context or understanding, and as a result are not learning the concepts behind the information or how to apply it.¹³

3.21 Dr Matthews explained that teaching is most effective when taught through a cultural lens to provide context and support student understanding:

I went to one school and a teacher came straight up to me – it is amazing what teachers do – and said, 'These kids can't multiply. I can't teach them maths, because they can't multiply.' I went, 'Okay, sure.' Then I sat down with one of the Ngunga teachers... We got together and started talking about seeing maths as more of a bunch of symbols put together to tell the story that is connected to the world that is around us. She presented this idea straight to the kids. They did a brainstorming session where the kids were confronted with two times three is equal to six and they were asked, 'What does this mean to you?' They wrote down all the language words – it was not just times, it was divide, plus and minus – that could connect them to that symbol. So we did that and then she set out a whole bunch of times tables, and the kids sat down and they were circling the symbols and writing the language words next to it and then working out the answer. I think that is a powerful approach instead of sitting there going to two times three equals six.¹⁴

3.22 Professor Thomas Cooper, YuMi Deadly Centre, Queensland University of Technology, agreed, asserting that:

The most powerful way to learn mathematics is to go from the whole to the part, to see the compass to build structures in the mind and to enable the new knowledge to fit into it. The best way to do that is actively, by movement or activity. But it has got to be related to the culture of the students. If I were in university and most of my students were African refugees, say, it would be their culture that I would be starting from and moving back into. But in

¹³ Dr Christopher Matthews, Chair, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 5 February 2016, p. 18.

¹⁴ Dr Christopher Matthews, Chair, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 5 February 2016, p. 18.

an Indigenous community it is Indigenous culture. Elders always say, 'We want them to be really good at maths but we want them to be strong on their culture.' The first thing is to try and maintain both, and I believe you can, very strongly. I believe a lot of the problems with Indigenous students is that it is not done.¹⁵

Teaching through language

- 3.23 Indigenous languages are the foundation upon which the capacity to learn, interact and to shape identity is built. In 2012, the House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs found that there are high numbers of Indigenous students in urban, regional and remote areas with a first language or dialect other than Standard Australian English.
- 3.24 In 2012, the House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs recommended that all teachers working in schools with Indigenous students should be required to complete English as a Second Language or Dialect (ESL/D) and cultural awareness training as part of mandatory professional development. The committee also called for ESL/D training to be made a compulsory component for all teaching degrees.¹⁶ The Federal Government agreed, in principle, to both recommendations.¹⁷
- 3.25 The Australian Education Union (AEU) highlighted a study on bilingual education which found that children who are monolingual in a language other than English need explicit teaching of the English language, by trained ESL/D teachers, before they can learn through English as the medium of instruction. As a result, the AEU stated:

We believe students who have an Indigenous language or dialect as their first, second or third language should attract appropriate ESL support and funding and call for well-resourced, appropriately staffed bilingual education programs, where communities choose to support bilingual programs in local schools.¹⁸

¹⁵ Professor Thomas Cooper, YuMi Deadly Centre, Queensland University of Technology, *Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 5 February 2016, p. 18.

¹⁶ House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our Land Our Languages: Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*, September 2012, pp. 156–157.

¹⁷ Australian Government, *Response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs report: Our Land Our Languages: Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*, June 2013, pp. 12–13.

¹⁸ Australian Education Union, *Submission 45*, 44th Parliament, p. 36.

- 3.26 In the current inquiry, whilst the majority of submissions acknowledged the important role that Indigenous languages play in terms of connection to culture and kinship, views regarding bilingual education and teaching in Indigenous languages were mixed.¹⁹
- 3.27 Whilst the Central Land Council (CLC) acknowledged the importance of English proficiency, it cautioned against the belief that the solution lies in largely removing Indigenous languages from schools. It asserted that:
- Aboriginal people in Central Australia have long viewed education success in terms of students that are confident in their Arrernte, Warlpiri or Pitjantjatjara identities, the incorporation of local language and knowledge frameworks, alongside strong mainstream education outcomes... This includes a long-standing desire for the delivery of bilingual programs in remote schools. Where language, culture and country visits are incorporated into school programs, community engagement with the school increases.²⁰
- 3.28 Mr James Tucker, Principal, Kulkarriya Community School, noted that:
- [I]n terms of learning standard Australian English, our kids are learning standard Australian English from the moment they walk in the door. The community is happy with that process at the moment. Different leadership in community or a different school board might see that differently. As I said, we have had pretty stable governance for the last 10 to 15 years. It is pretty clear that the school board and the school committee want the kids to be able to speak and understand Australian English, they want them to be able to do some numeracy and they want them to have the things to compete in the dominant culture.²¹
- 3.29 However, Mr Tobias Nganbe, Managing Director, Thamarrurr Development Corporation, told the committee that, in Wadeye, it is not necessary for students to be taught language and culture at school because they are fully immersed in culture and language at home and in

¹⁹ For example: National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University, *Submission 53*, 44th Parliament; Australian Education Union, *Submission 45*, 44th Parliament; World Vision Australia, *Submission 12*, 44th Parliament; Central Land Council, *Submission 41*, 44th Parliament; Ninti One, *Submission 6*, 44th Parliament; National Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 18*, 44th Parliament; Save the Children, *Submission 59*, 44th Parliament; Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle, *Submission 15*, 44th Parliament; and Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, *Submission 17*, 44th Parliament.

²⁰ Central Land Council, *Submission 41*, 44th Parliament, p. 16.

²¹ Mr James (Ted) Tucker, Principal, Kulkarriya Community School, *Committee Hansard*, Fitzroy Crossing, 27 June 2017, pp. 18-19.

community. Rather, he asserted there needs to be a greater focus on teaching students English and the 'western way of doing things'. He noted that:

I am not jealous, but my feelings are not good when I see a Yolngu kid in Darwin doing their own thing, going to the store and getting a bus with their parents; whereas with our mob, the Murrinh-Patha people, are still not comfortable, they are still not confident, because of the English language. They need to operate in English. The money does not come with Murrinh-Patha. And then all of the things that are happening in this community – English is the language that, as far as I am concerned, the school must really focus on.²²

Committee comment

- 3.30 Australia is a nation of many cultures and languages, where a good proportion of students speak a language other than English at home. There are many students who enter the Australian education system, at a range of year levels, who had been living overseas and may have very limited English comprehension. It is widely understood and accepted that students that speak English as a second language or dialect (ESL/D students) are not less intelligent or less capable than students for whom English is a first language. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that learning English while being instructed in English is challenging and often requires intensive support.
- 3.31 Throughout the inquiry, the committee was disappointed to hear that the ability to speak an Indigenous language is rarely recognised in the same way as the ability to speak a foreign language. The committee is of the view that all ESL/D language students should have access to an Intensive English Language program as well as in-classroom support; regardless of whether the student's first language is an Australian Indigenous language or a foreign language.
- 3.32 The committee notes the differing views regarding teaching Indigenous languages in schools. This wide variety of opinion highlights that, as with many other policies and programs, one size does not fit all. Policy regarding the balance between English and Indigenous languages being taught must be steered by the community. The committee agrees with the CLC's assertion that, where a community is committed to the

²² Mr Tobias Nganbe, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Thamarrurr Development Corporation, *Committee Hansard*, Wadeye, 5 April 2017, pp. 3–4.

implementation of a bilingual program, local schools should be supported to implement the program.

- 3.33 However, the committee acknowledges that for many schools it may not be possible or practical to provide bilingual education in an Indigenous language. This may be because the school has only a small number of Indigenous students, or because the Indigenous students at a school may be from a range of different culture and language groups. Nonetheless, all schools should value and celebrate the Indigenous languages spoken by students and local communities and encourage and support students to maintain and strengthen their first languages.

Recommendation 8 (Priority)

- 3.34 **The committee recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the Minister for Education take a proposal to the Council of Australian Governments to:**
- **make English as a Second Language or Dialect (ESL/D) training a compulsory component for all teaching degrees;**
 - **require all teachers already working in schools with a substantial number of Indigenous students to complete in-service ESL/D training as part of mandatory professional development; and**
 - **where relevant, an opportunity be provided to teachers to undertake local language training if this will assist in performing their functions, improving communications with their students, as well as forging better relations with the community.**

Indigenous teachers and leadership

- 3.35 Evidence received by the committee clearly demonstrated that schools place high value on the work of Indigenous teachers, whether they are qualified teachers or working as assistant teachers, liaison officers, and other staff.²³

²³ For example: Australian Education Union, *Submission 45*, 44th Parliament; Wongutha CAPS, *Submission 37*, 44th Parliament; Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44th Parliament; Assistant Professor Dr Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44th Parliament; Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission 16*, 44th Parliament; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 20*, 44th Parliament; National Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 18*, 44th Parliament; Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory

- 3.36 Ms Taneshia Atkinson told the committee that the support she received from the full-time Indigenous liaison officer ‘really did help me further my education’. She explained that:

I had an Aboriginal liaison officer – I went to Kingscliff High School in northern New South Wales – who was just one of the most remarkable women I have met. She took me under her wing and she really mothered me. She was a positive role model for me and she really encouraged me to finish high school...I believe that the fact that I was provided with a culturally appropriate space and an Aboriginal liaison officer really did help me further my education.²⁴

- 3.37 Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, Australian National University, explained that her research found that ‘having more Indigenous staff – specifically Indigenous teaching staff and also Indigenous support staff – was one of the greatest strengths of the schools that had them’.²⁵

- 3.38 Mr Mark Tunmuck Smith, Youth Service Coordinator, Thathangathay Foundation, told the committee that the involvement and engagement of community elders in his school had a significant impact on attendance and encouraged educational achievement:

I will just go back to my school years in Wadeye...It was different back then because there were a lot of elders, and we used to respect a lot, and we used to do the right thing in school... The right thing is making sure you listen to your teachers, you listen to what you get told and you make sure you stay focussed... Nowadays, I see kids disrespecting their parents and walking off from school, when they should be in school learning.²⁶

- 3.39 Mr Romulo Tchernia, Director, and Mr Russell Melphi, Support Staff, Thathangathay Foundation, agreed, explaining that when they were at school, the presence of elders had a significant impact on whether or not they attended.²⁷

Council, *Submission 2*, 44th Parliament; and Broome Senior High School, *Submission 46*, 45th Parliament.

²⁴ Ms Taneshia Atkinson, Former National Indigenous Youth Parliamentarian, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 26 May 2017, p. 9.

²⁵ Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 22.

²⁶ Mr Mark Tunmuck Smith, Youth Service Coordinator, Thathangathay Foundation, *Committee Hansard*, Wadeye, 5 April 2017, pp. 13–14.

²⁷ Mr Romulo Tchernia, Director, and Mr Russell Melphi, Support Staff, Thathangathay Foundation, *Committee Hansard*, Wadeye, 5 April 2017, p. 14.

- 3.40 The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) was a national five-year research project undertaken by the University of South Australia and funded by the Federal Government, that sought to increase the:
- number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in teaching positions in Australian schools;
 - capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and
 - retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in teaching positions.²⁸
- 3.41 The MATSITI Final Report noted that between 2012 and 2015, the number of Indigenous teachers increased by 16.5% due to recruitment and improved levels of Indigenous identification.²⁹
- 3.42 The CLC asserted that ‘increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers per school and providing them with training and professional development...is a critical factor necessary for improving education outcomes’.³⁰

Committee comment

- 3.43 It is clear that an increase in Indigenous teachers, teaching assistants and liaison officers with a connection to the community would not only provide an element of cultural safety in schools, but would also help to provide consistency and stability in terms of staff resources.
- 3.44 The committee agrees with the CLC’s calls for expansions of Aboriginal Assistant Teacher allocations and programs to address the barriers to increasing the number of Indigenous teachers. The committee supports the call for the Australian Council of Australian Governments Education Council to recommit to a more equitable ratio of teachers to Indigenous students.
- 3.45 The committee commends the work undertaken by the MATSITI.

²⁸ Professor Peter Buckskin, *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative: Final Report*, September 2016, p. 12.

²⁹ Professor Peter Buckskin, *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative: Final Report*, September 2016, p. 6.

³⁰ Central Land Council, *Submission 41*, 44th Parliament, p. 18.