



This Q & A factsheet is part of a series Reconciliation Australia is producing aimed at informing the community and stimulating conversations about the issues that affect us all.

Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives in Australian schools

With the new national curriculum being developed and a new school year about to begin, what we teach in our schools about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and perspectives is being discussed. Here are some straightforward answers to questions you might have about this issue.

- 1. Do Australian schools teach students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives?**
- 2. What do Australian students learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives at school?**
- 3. What are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and why is this a separate thing to studying history and culture?**
- 4. Why should students learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives at school?**
- 5. Do Australian parents want their kids to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives?**
- 6. Does this mean non-Indigenous students will be made to feel guilty about what happened in the past?**
- 7. How will education help reconciliation?**
- 8. What do other countries teach about their Indigenous peoples in schools?**
- 9. What are some of the things a school can do to recognise and incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures?**

1. Do Australian schools teach students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and cultures are taught in schools across Australia as part of the curriculum of each state and territory, although some schools and some states and territories have a stronger focus than others. In recent years there has been a lot more focus on it than there was in the past. However, there is still a lot of variation in what and how much is taught from school to school.

2. What do Australian students learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives at school?

What Australian students learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives in school varies depending on where they live and also which school they attend. This is because the state and territory governments have primary responsibility for education. Also the degree of attention paid to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives, history and culture depends on individual principals.

Some examples of what is being taught today: in Victoria, Years 7 and 8 students study the 1967 Referendum in History and in New South Wales in Years 3 and 4 students study British colonisation from Aboriginal and European perspectives. In New South Wales high schools, students might also look at the work of Aboriginal artists in creative art to develop values and understanding of artworks in a social and cultural context. In Tasmania students study books by Indigenous writers in English and Literature and in the ACT Year 10 students learn about the Myall Creek massacre and are asked to connect it to the circumstances of Indigenous Australians today.

To learn about the curriculum content of your state or territory you can visit your education department's website.

3. What are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and why is this a separate thing to studying history and culture?

Indigenous perspectives are connected to history and culture but are really a way of including Indigenous knowledge and practice into all areas of the curriculum – not just in History or Social Studies. In Victoria, for example, Year 5 and Year 6 students learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' care of the land when they study Geography. The Western Australian curriculum includes spear throwing in the Maths curriculum for upper primary so children can learn about measurement and creating graphs for results. In Science they can learn about sustainability and ecology through studying how the Nyoongar people look after their wetlands. For some great examples of Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum visit the WA education department's site http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/abled/apac/lessons/lessons_phase_mc.html.

4. Why should students learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives at school?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives teach Australian children about their country's heritage and original inhabitants as well as the ongoing impact of colonisation and how we have come to be the society we are today. Aboriginal peoples are the oldest continuing culture in the world, have occupied this continent for over 40,000 years and are an important part of our national identity.

Evidence shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' attendance and outcomes improve when Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are taught in the classroom. But learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and history doesn't only benefit Indigenous kids. A report released by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) found that learning an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language can enhance a range of academic outcomes for all students. For non-Indigenous students, learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples leads to

mutual respect, a greater understanding of cultural difference and richer knowledge of Australia's history.

5. Do Australian parents want their kids to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, cultures and perspectives?

The Australian Reconciliation Barometer research found that both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians believe it's important for Australians to learn about Indigenous history and culture. For example, 86% of the national sample agreed 'it is important that all Australians know about Indigenous culture' and 100% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sample agreed with this statement. Similarly, 84% of the national sample agreed with the statement, 'I think it's important that all Australians know the history of Indigenous people in Australia', and 99% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents agreed.

6. Does this mean non-Indigenous students will be made to feel guilty about what happened in the past?

In recent years there has been debate about teaching students Australian history. This has focussed on issues related to colonial violence and dispossession—what has been termed the 'black armband' view of history. However, for students there is benefit in learning about colonisation from different perspectives. Making connections between the past and present is essential to their overall education. No aspect of the State school curriculum asks students to take responsibility for colonial violence or dispossession. Rather, they are taught about these aspects within a broader understanding of Australian history, which includes many other issues and events from past.

7. How will education help reconciliation?

In the past, little was taught in schools about Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander history, culture or perspectives. Students weren't taught much about dispossession and events such as massacres of Aboriginal people by white settlers or police. Nor were they taught about Aboriginal resistance to being removed from their land or the ingenuity and innovation of the world's oldest continuing culture. This has led to the common refrain of 'why weren't we told?' as adults have recognised that the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their education has contributed to their lack of understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

The connection between a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in school and the continuation of racist attitudes was made almost 20 years ago by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). The RCIADIC recommended that, to counter racism and negative views and treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their perspectives and histories be included in school programs:

Curricula of schools at all levels should reflect the fact that Australia has an Aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters. It is essential that Aboriginal viewpoints, interests, perceptions and expectations are reflected in curricula, teaching and administration of schools.

Today, there is widespread recognition of the connection between reconciliation and what is taught in our schools. Learning about, respecting and valuing Australia's Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander past and present makes it harder for racism and exclusion to persist and helps foster a shared pride in our unique national story.

8. What do other countries teach about their Indigenous peoples in schools?

One example Australia can look to is New Zealand, where Maori culture (including language), history and perspectives are part of the mainstream curriculum in all schools, starting in early childhood. The New Zealand national curriculum outlines how it “work(s) to create an Aotearoa New Zealand in which Māori and Pākehā recognise each other as full Treaty partners, and in which all cultures are valued for the contributions they bring” and it offers all students the opportunity to learn Maori language and culture.

9. What are some of the things a school can do to recognise and incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures?

What’s taught in the curriculum is important, but there are lots of other ways in which schools can incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture and perspectives into their school. Some simple things include celebrating NAIDOC week, raising the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, making connections with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community organisations and inviting elders to come to the school to speak. In Western Australia, PALS (which stands for Partnerships, Acceptance, Learning and Sharing) encourages young people to take a leadership role in strengthening the relationships that exist in their local community between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people.

Many schools have also developed and are developing Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs). RAPs turn good intentions into actions by asking schools to identify what contribution they can make to close the unacceptable life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

For more information about what you can do at your school see:

Reconciliation Action Plans

<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/home/reconciliation-action-plans/raps-for-schools>

PALS

<http://pals.dia.wa.gov.au/default.aspx>

10. Will more new National Curriculum include more content about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for the new national curriculum. There are plans to include Indigenous perspectives in the new national curriculum as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and history. ACARA plans to consult Indigenous advisors in the development of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content.