

Provide flexible, culturally responsive education



As an educator, you already know you need to create flexible, accessible learning opportunities built on the experiences of the children in your classroom. In the Pilbara and Kimberley, this means developing a culturally responsive education in which you actively work to "make connections between each student's home and school experiences, and use a range of learning opportunities that make schooling more effective for Aboriginal students" (Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework, 2015).

As outlined in previous sections of this resource, generations of Aboriginal children – particularly those of mixed descent – were removed from their families and placed in missions, orphanages and children's homes. This happened between 1910 and the 1970s, and these children are referred to as the Stolen Generations. The Healing Foundation's website: <https://healingfoundation.org.au/> and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies website: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/> have some information about intergenerational trauma and other impacts of colonisation and assimilation.

“Some (of the families) been taken away, the Stolen Generation, you know, so that has a lot of effect on a lot of the people and families, as well as the kids.”
– Roebourne AIEO

Over time, communities have shown strength and resilience in navigating this trauma and its ongoing effects. You can assist with this healing and actively change the educational experience of Aboriginal children and young people by working with Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEO), Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATA) and the community to make your learning space culturally safe and responsive.

“They teach students and students/community teach them.”
– Aboriginal medical service CEO

Despite rising awareness, there is still a significant gap in educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. You can make a tangible difference as an educator. By inviting children and young people to share their cultures you are amplifying their voice – a way of building connections and valuing their experience. “They are teachers, also,” a Roebourne AIEO noted. Creating a supportive and inclusive learning community helps build the foundations for lifelong social and emotional wellbeing.



“Aboriginal people across the Kimberley and Pilbara have varying degrees of cultural connectedness and words for describing their Liyan (spirit)”
- Community member

Your cultural awareness learning will, and should, be ongoing. Look for every opportunity to build on this so you can take what you have learnt and apply it in your classroom. You can continue your cultural awareness learning through the school, community programs and events. Speak with AIEOs, ATAs, and community members for information about the local region, such as the history, significant sites, and questions that can and can't be asked.

“In order to understand another culture, non-Aboriginal teachers need to know their own culture first. How does their culture influence them, their thoughts and actions? Is their culture dominating and relegating Aboriginal culture to second place?”
- Aboriginal medical service CEO

When Aboriginal children enter their learning community they are required to code-switch. They leave their homes, where they interact and speak according to their Aboriginal cultures and backgrounds – and are disciplined differently – and switch to English to interact in a Western educational and social environment. They then switch back to Aboriginal once the school day is over. Aboriginal children are experts at code-switching, but it takes a lot out of them and requires much skill on their part.

Creating a culturally responsive classroom for Aboriginal children starts with developing two-way cultural respect, understanding their individual story and sharing your own. You'll need to be mindful of kinship obligations, avoidance relationships, physical cues – such as whether it's appropriate to make direct eye contact – and family dynamics. For example, when you're creating groups for an activity there may be some children you can't ask to work together. Another example could be the way you engage with young men who have been through initiation. You may need to adapt your interactions with them to reflect that they are now considered an adult, with adult responsibilities, in the community.

“I used to get in trouble from teachers for not looking them in the face ... (but) when I was growing up, you know, when Elders are talking to me, I didn't look them in the face because that's respect for me to them.”
- Aboriginal medical service liaison officer



The AIEO or ATA can help you navigate cultural practices. It may be useful to watch 2019 documentary *In My Blood It Runs* (<https://inmyblooditrans.com/>), which explores the challenges 10-year-old Dujan, a child-healer, faces balancing his traditional Arrernte/Garrwa upbringing with his Western education.

Build a strong connection with the AIEO or ATA in your school. Working with them to develop engagement and learning strategies will help you do this, as they will have an understanding about what will and won't work in their community. For example, in Parnngurr, educators and students go out on Country with Martu rangers for activities such as mapping local areas, looking for and counting bilbies, tracking animals and looking for soaks (waterholes). Another example is teaching children measurements by how far they can kick a football or cast a fishing line.

“Don't be afraid to do this.
The power is in the team
you create with the AIEO
and the students”
- Roebourne AIEO

You should set high expectations for all the children in your learning community, based on their individual strengths and skills, to help them reach their potential. You have a responsibility to every child to support their learning through the lens of their cultures, their background and their lived experience.

“We want to try and make these kids sort of see that they can achieve anything they put their mind to, they deserve to grab themselves a better life – they just got to be the ones to grab it.”
- Roebourne educator

The performance descriptions for teachers in the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework will help you identify indicators to achieve this goal. A Menzies School of Health Research review into 'Cultural Responsiveness and School Education' (https://www.menzies.edu.au/icms_docs/312407_Cultural_Responsiveness_and_School_Education.pdf) also provides useful information regarding this topic. The Be You Cultural Actions Catalogue will help you find place-based, culturally responsive actions you can apply in your learning community.



As an educator, you are guided by a state curriculum. Be mindful you are bringing a Western education into a different cultural context. Aboriginal children and young people live in two worlds – they carry beliefs and cultures passed down through generations and these may not align with the Western concepts presented at school. Bridge the curriculum with the cultures, language and knowledge of the community. For example, at Fitzroy schools, children can choose – with the approval of their families or caregivers – between learning Bunuba, Walmajarri or Gooniyandi. Cable Beach and Broome primary school children learn Yawuru, while primary and secondary schools in Newman are incorporating Martu in their curriculum.

One AIEO recalled a visit to an aged care home a few years ago, when aged care workers saw a change in an elderly man who was generally very quiet and “kept to himself”: “When he heard the kids coming in to visit, he sort of sat up and he started singing a song in language to the kids.... and the kids all sat around, listening to him and then they're like, ‘Miss, what was that old fella singing about?’”

“The children are our future. If we can get them to have more belief in their culture, that will make them stronger ... and getting them to pass on that knowledge, or keeping it and passing it on, it makes them stronger with what they know.” –
Roebourne AIEO

As you plan your lessons, continually ask yourself: “What lens am I using as I plan this lesson? Is it a culturally responsive one? How can I partner with the AIEO, or community members, to make this lesson more culturally appropriate?”

“I’ve never been told,
or anyone in my school,
about our black history.”
– Roebourne AIEO

You'll need to be particularly mindful of providing an accurate view of history and geography that articulates the horrific impacts of colonisation for Aboriginal Peoples. As part of your 'walking softly', you should take the time to learn local Aboriginal history from the community and discuss how to teach it as part of your culturally responsive approach to education. Ask the AIEO or ATA you work with to support in this and reach out to community members or Elders to lead these lessons, perhaps on Country. Everyone plays a role in creating a culturally safe environment.

“This kid, you hardly get him to speak or say much, he shook me ... and told me, this tree – and he named the tree – and said what you use it for. It blew me away and I think, I know you've been listening to me. Definitely being out of the classroom settings – it gives that student something to look forward to.”
- Roebourne AIEO

“When you're going out in Country and you're talking about stuff ... when you're connecting the language and the Country together, you know, it's making it come alive again.”
- Roebourne AIEO

While your first preference should be to consult with AIEOs, ATAs and community members about local cultures and history, the following educational websites also have a range of useful teaching resources: [ABC Education](#), [SBS Learn](#) and [Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education](#).

