

Teaching the Teachers Aboriginal Studies: Illuminating Successful Strategies

**Janet Mooney
University of Sydney, Australia**

**Christine Halse
School of Education and Early Childhood Studies
University of Western Sydney, Australia**

**Rhonda G. Craven
Self-Concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation Research Centre
University of Western Sydney, Australia**

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Janet Mooney
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The study was commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) under its Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP). The project goals were supported by the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.; New South Wales Teachers Federation, New South Wales Primary Principals' Association; New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET); the national Aboriginal Studies Association; and the Australian Council of Deans of Education. This paper reports on the qualitative component of the study (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney & Wilson-Miller, in press a, in press b). The qualitative component of the project consists of in-depth interviews with Heads of Schools, Directors of Aboriginal Education Units and teacher educators and includes three Case Studies. Fifteen institutions in Australia offer Aboriginal Studies as a core, perspective or elective program in Primary Teacher Education Courses in Australia. Of these institutions seven institutions from four States responded to the invitation to participate in the study. From these institutions three were engaged to submit a case study of their institution as they had demonstrated that they had successfully introduced core Aboriginal Studies teacher units in their course. This paper presents the findings and discusses teaching Aboriginal Studies, its inclusion in curriculum and its worth for fostering reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians within universities, schools and the wider community.

Introduction

The teaching of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum in primary schools has long been seen as an important tool for achieving reconciliation, political reformation, and the recognition of collective rights, for all Australian people. For decades teacher education institutions have been encouraged to introduce mandatory Aboriginal Studies courses into their curriculum (e.g. Auchmuty, 1980; Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; Australian Councils of Deans of Education, 1998, 2001; Craven, 1999a; 1999b, 2000). Over the past decade an important historical shift has taken place in a number of Australian primary teacher education institutions whereby they have begun to introduce core Aboriginal studies subjects into their undergraduate teacher education degrees. However, there has been a dearth of research in Aboriginal Studies research generally and in particular in regards to teacher education and schooling (see Bin-Sallik, Blomely, Flowers, & Hughes, 1994a, 1994b; Bourke, Dow & Lucas, 1994). This study illuminates the perspectives; experiences; challenges; and rewards for those directly involved in the design and delivery of Aboriginal Studies subjects to pre-service primary school teachers.

Aim

The overarching aim of this component of the study was to identify: common aspects of universities' rationales for introducing/not introducing core subjects, successful strategies employed to introduce core subjects, difficulties encountered introducing core subjects, barriers to introducing core subjects and possible solutions deemed useful for developing a core Aboriginal Studies subject.

Participants

The qualitative component of the project consists of in-depth interviews with Heads of Schools, Directors of Aboriginal Education Units and teacher educators and included three case studies. There were 15 institutions in Australia who at the time of the study offered Aboriginal Studies as a core, perspective or elective program in Primary Teacher Education Courses. Of these, seven institutions from four States agreed to participate in the study. From these institutions three were employed to submit a case study of their institution as they had demonstrated that they had successfully introduced core Aboriginal Studies teaching subjects into their courses.

Results

Rationale for Aboriginal Studies in Different Universities

In spite of whether institutions offered Aboriginal Studies as a core, elective or cross curricula perspective, participants in the study were unanimous that Aboriginal Studies was an important subject in pre-service primary teacher education programs. Participants, however, provided a range of different reasons to support their views.

Benefits for Pre-service Teachers

In commenting on the particular benefits for their students participants noted that, their students often had little or no prior experience of interacting with Indigenous people. As such Aboriginal Studies courses were seen as starting point for students as fostering reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians through open-minded discussions and a willingness to listen to Indigenous perspectives. Others saw Aboriginal Studies courses as an effective tool for combating racism. It was argued that, equipping pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills to teach Aboriginal Studies benefited all students and would bring about a positive change in Australian society. A number of teacher educators, indicated a strong personal and professional commitment to Aboriginal Studies pre-service teacher education, and maintained that pre-service teacher education courses had a moral responsibility to teach beyond an Australian 'white' perspective to create a more just society.

Teaching Aboriginal Children

Although participants agreed unanimously with the Aboriginal Education philosophy that Aboriginal Studies benefited students, they placed different emphasis on what benefits students received. All attested to the low participation and retention rates of Indigenous students in schools and the important role that pre-service teacher education served in equipping pre-service teachers to teach Indigenous children. Directors of Aboriginal Education Units in particular, argued the need for teachers to understand the different learning styles of Indigenous children, if schools wanted to foster positive learning outcomes. There were different opinions between the participants on whether Indigenous or

non-Indigenous teacher educators were best equipped to fulfil this role. Some participants felt that the teaching of Indigenous children was a special responsibility requiring particular social and cultural expertise of teacher educators that could only be gained through intimate, personal knowledge acquired by membership of Indigenous society. Directors agreed that pre-service courses needed to equip non-Indigenous educators with the understanding and knowledge of the learning styles and non-verbal cues to teach Aboriginal children. Some participants argued that Aboriginal Studies teacher educators should have the capacity to teach a range of children and that “being a good educator” was the key indicator of the capacity and confidence of teachers to teach Aboriginal children. Some participants argued that the crucial ingredients in creating teachers that could teach Aboriginal students included subject areas that addressed issues such as: unmasking cultural whiteness; a knowledge of how to form a partnership between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples, critical analytical skills on contemporary race relations and shared history; as well as the pedagogical skills to make learning come to life in the classroom.

Teaching in a Multicultural Society

Teacher educators had observed that many of the pre-service teachers in their courses had very little experience of children from other cultures, and argued that there was a lack of preparation of pre-service teacher trainees in working with multicultural school populations. Both teacher educators, and Directors of Aboriginal Education Units argued that a primary benefit of pre-service teacher education in regards to teaching Indigenous students was that it provided teachers with skills that could be adapted for multicultural school populations. Teacher educators also suggested that it was difficult for pre-service teachers to comprehend the importance of learning the pedagogical skills for working with multicultural populations as pre-service teachers perceived practical skills for mastering curriculum content as much more important.

Participants, in particular teacher educators, were concerned that pre-service teachers would be placed in schools with multicultural populations, and that novice teachers were ill-equipped to address the cultural issues they were likely to confront. It was argued that, teachers with little experience of other cultures were likely to suffer ‘culture shock’ which could be a daunting experience for novice teachers. In these examples, participants recognised the need for pre-service teacher education courses to address teaching children from the perspective of Australia being a multi-cultural society as well as addressing the special needs of Indigenous children.

Fostering Reconciliation

Participants agreed that Aboriginal Studies in pre-service teacher education had the capacity to foster reconciliation amongst Australians by exposing pre-service teachers to Aboriginal values and history. Whilst Heads of Schools believed pre-service teacher education had the ability to address community ignorance and misunderstandings, this was a complex process of critical thinking that could not be addressed using a simple linear teaching model that assumed that students automatically absorbed whatever information teacher educators imparted. The study showed that the areas identified as important in fostering reconciliation were communicating an understanding of Indigenous beliefs to non-Indigenous peoples, the benefits of understanding and communication for cooperation, and the value of establishing partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Heads of Schools argued that this was considered a highly valuable outcome of pre-service teacher education in Aboriginal Studies.

The Place of Aboriginal Studies in Pre-Service Teacher Education

Pre-service teacher education programs undertaken as part of primary teaching degree requirement varied widely from one-year programs for graduate students to four-year Bachelor of Education programs. The place of Aboriginal Studies within this spectrum, ranged widely across the sample of universities represented by those interviewed. In some institutions, Aboriginal Studies was offered as a core subject. In other institutions it was available to students as both a mandatory course and through a wide range of elective subjects. It was noted that whether institutions ran the elective subjects offered on a regular basis varied according to the availability of staff, the type of other electives available, sufficient funding and student interest. It is also interesting to note that two Heads of Schools observed that Aboriginal Studies subjects in their institution, tended to be amongst the more popular electives students selected.

In institutions where Aboriginal Studies was not a compulsory subject in pre-service courses there were different opinions amongst participants about whether or not Aboriginal Studies should be taught as a cross-curricula perspective or as a discrete Aboriginal Studies subject. Participants suggested it was important for pre-service teachers to learn the content of Aboriginal Studies, but identified the need for teachers to be able to integrate this knowledge in a meaningful way into each school curriculum area. Teacher educators in particular, felt that Aboriginal Studies should be incorporated across all curriculum areas from the first year of pre-service training, if institutions wanted to emphasise the importance of Aboriginal Studies for all Australian students in all schools.

The importance of where Aboriginal Studies was placed in undergraduate degrees was of concern amongst some teacher educators and Directors of Aboriginal Education Units, who expressed anxiety about how and when courses were offered. In some institutions Aboriginal Studies was an elective, which did not ensure that all pre-service teachers were taught Aboriginal Studies. While others were concerned about what year Aboriginal Studies subjects were placed. For instance, in one institution Aboriginal Studies was only offered to pre-service teachers in their final year which was seen by the respondent as communicating an impression that Aboriginal Studies was a 'token' subject of less importance than other subjects because it was placed at the end of the degree. For this reason, several participants expressed that Aboriginal Studies should be taught as an integrated perspective across subjects. Although, in NSW schools it is mandatory to include Aboriginal perspective across the curriculum, Heads of Schools were unanimous in believing that this 'did not happen'. So for this reason, Heads of Schools argued that Aboriginal Studies needed to be a discrete subject in pre-service courses. It was also found that there was a higher level of support for teaching Aboriginal Studies perspectives in institutions where the Vice-Chancellor's office rather than the Faculty of Education had jurisdiction over Aboriginal Studies. For instance, in Queensland, Education Queensland and the Board of Teacher Education worked together with university personnel to implement a cross-curricula approach. In addition, within the Australian Catholic University system a perspectives approach was in keeping with the institution's social justice agenda. Hence, faculties were encouraged to expand upon a perspectives approach in their subject areas due to institutional policies and ethos.

Barriers and Difficulties Encountered

Teacher educators were the most vocal group in voicing concerns about the barriers and difficulties they encountered teaching Aboriginal Studies. This was because they generally had primary carriage for establishing and implementing Aboriginal Studies subjects. They identified several areas where they needed stronger support, for example, in building the

profile and status of Aboriginal Studies, and staffing. Directors also expressed a concern about inadequate funding arrangements, which impacted, on their ability to appoint qualified, full-time education staff appointments. It was found that strong support from senior staff in the institution is required to ensure that appropriate levels of human and material resources were allocated to implementing Aboriginal Studies subjects and perspectives. Without exception, all participants agreed that a major barrier to implementing a high quality Aboriginal Studies subjects was their institution's commitment to Aboriginal Studies courses.

Staff and Student Resistance

All interview participants reported some differing degrees of resistance amongst some Faculty staff and students to core Aboriginal Studies subjects. Participants noted that there was little signs of overt racism or explicit objections to Aboriginal Studies from staff in the Faculty. However, staff resistance was usually framed around pedagogical issues, tensions and uncertainty in an already crowded curriculum. Some teacher educators mentioned how some students openly displayed resentment at being required to undertake compulsory courses in Aboriginal Studies. Whilst others reported that some students found the course material too confronting, and that sometimes the negative student attitudes of students affected the morale of university staff. Although participants recognised these negative influences, they agreed that undertaking a core Aboriginal Studies subject usually impacted positively on the majority of students and by the end of the course they usually observed a positive attitudinal change in most of their students.

Staffing Aboriginal Studies Subjects

There was a mixture of responses about who was best placed to teach Aboriginal Studies. The general consensus was that Indigenous personnel were better positioned to successfully handle discussions about sensitive Indigenous issues, particularly if there were Indigenous students in the class. Other respondents felt that Indigenous staff had a higher level of credibility, as they were able to share their own story, and were intimately familiar with course content. Although Indigenous teachers felt that sometimes they were put under pressure as they were seen as the experts or the authority for all things Indigenous.

In contrast, non-Indigenous teachers reported that they sometimes felt confronted by students who questioned their credibility - especially if they had Indigenous students in classes. Although all respondents generally supported the notion of Indigenous staff teaching Aboriginal Studies, Heads of Schools reported implementing this policy was more problematic as it was sometimes difficult to recruit Indigenous staff with appropriate academic and/or teaching qualifications, or who were familiar with the local community.

In general participants were more concerned that teaching staff, regardless of the teachers' cultural background, had the appropriate skills with substantive content knowledge to teach Aboriginal Studies. It was also considered of particular importance that tertiary teachers be empathetic with Indigenous issues and able to 'teach the truth'. Regardless of ethnicity, confidence, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and the capacity to teach critical thinking about Aboriginal issues, was thought to be the most important attributes for teachers.

Pedagogical Issues in the Delivery of Tertiary Studies Courses

Some participants raised pedagogical issues in the delivery of Aboriginal Studies programmes. For instance, they expressed concern that courses needed to have a stronger emphasis on practical approaches to teaching Aboriginal Studies in schools. In other cases respondents felt that there was a need for teaching methodology to be built into the course.

In contrast, some universities reported that due to the collaboration between the School of Education and Aboriginal Education Unit they had developed innovative programmes for Aboriginal Studies course content that addressed both the Aboriginal content and pedagogical issues in Aboriginal Studies.

Funding

Lack of funding was a prominent theme, as respondents noted, funding had a significant impact on staffing and the nature and extent of course content. Some Directors reported that because funds were tight and minimal it impacted on their departments. Other Directors, raised concerns about generating the funding to deliver programs and providing the support and guidance needed by schools. The excess of mandatory government requirements in pre-service teacher education curriculum was cited as a funding issue, as they often imposed difficult requirements on programs that were already stretched for time and funds. Nevertheless, in some institutions, particularly for those in the case studies, there was considerable and enthusiastic support for Aboriginal Studies.

Teaching Resources for Aboriginal Studies

Participants were all asked directly if they had used the resource 'Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Australian Studies' (Craven, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1996e, 1999c) which was developed as a Project of National Significance, to assist institutions in developing Aboriginal Studies courses in primary teacher education programmes. All of the participants interviewed knew of these resources. Although some respondent felt that it was more appropriate for NSW, most institutions had used this resource as a framework and adapted content to their own local context. It was also suggested by some participants, that the 'Teaching the Teachers' kit was so useful that it needed to be updated and also used in MED articulation programmes.

Content of Pre-service Aboriginal Studies Courses

Case studies analyses and the descriptions of courses by Heads of Schools, Directors of Aboriginal Education Units, and in particular teacher educators, demonstrated that there was considerable diversity across all primary teacher education subjects. Content ranged from subjects addressing socio-cultural and historical issues, to practicum teaching experiences with Aboriginal classes (although this was not reported as common in most institutions). According to participants, the content of pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies, needed to focus on issues such as: the concepts and the nature of culture and identity; understanding contemporary developments in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships; and fostering an understanding of cultural whiteness. In contrast, one Head of School complained that although 'cultural whiteness', was a basic framework for understanding society, it was not being addressed in course content at his/her institution.

There was agreement amongst participants that Aboriginal Studies content needed to go past the 'museum approach' to ensure the development of pre-service teachers understanding of contemporary cultural issues. Insufficient focus on pedagogy and 'how' to teach Aboriginal Studies in schools was also cited as a primary concern amongst participants. Teacher educators emphasised the need to ensure that courses linked theory and content focusing on 'how to teach' as well as 'what to teach' to demonstrate practical implementation for Aboriginal Studies in schools.

Conclusion

The interviews and case studies indicate strong agreement with the results emanating from the quantitative component of this study in that Aboriginal Studies is recognised by educators as an essential component of pre-service primary teacher education courses. The findings supported the literature and anecdotal evidence that Aboriginal Studies is extremely relevant to teaching and the school curricula, and an important ingredient in fostering reconciliation within universities, schools and the community. The study also found that many students entered undergraduate degrees with covert but deeply entrenched prejudices against Aboriginal culture and people. Although students often found the subject material confronting, the study found that Aboriginal Studies had the potential to produce high quality teachers, contribute to the broader national agenda of fostering reconciliation and social justice in schools and the wider community. It also found that for Aboriginal Studies to be implemented successfully it needs to be adequately funded and supported by the upper management in institutions, and the Education Departments in all states and Territories. This investigation is the first of its kind in that it illuminates the perspectives; experiences; challenges; and rewards of those directly involved in the design and delivery of Aboriginal Studies subjects to pre-service primary school teachers.

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