

Postgraduate Teachers' Commitment to Teach Aboriginal Studies in Australian Schools

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This study was commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) under its Education Innovation Program (EIP). The project goals were supported by the NSW Teachers Federation, NSW Primary Principals' Association; NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW DET); NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.; the Aboriginal Studies Association; and the Australian Council of Deans of Education. This paper presents the findings emanating from the qualitative component of the study. The qualitative component of this project followed and elaborated on the quantitative study which aimed to: a) critically evaluate the impact of preservice primary teacher education Aboriginal Studies courses on practising teachers' self-perceived abilities to appreciate, understand and effectively teach Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal perspectives, and Aboriginal children in Australian schools; b) compare and contrast the self-perceptions of teachers who had undertaken a core or elective course in Aboriginal Studies in their initial teacher education course with the self-perceptions of teachers who had not undertaken such courses; c) characterise participating teachers' initial teacher education courses in relation to the Aboriginal Studies content covered; and d) identify teachers' perceptions of useful structure and content to consider including in future teacher education courses. The responses from telephone interviews with teachers in schools and responses to open-ended questions in surveys are discussed. The findings identify congruence and dissonance in the areas of: the contribution of preservice teacher education; benefits of preservice Aboriginal Studies for students in schools; the place of Aboriginal Studies in schools and the curriculum; Aboriginal Studies and student ethnicity; strategies for teaching Aboriginal Studies; and the content of preservice courses.

Introduction

Mandatory policies for teaching Aboriginal Studies in Australian schools have been introduced (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989, 1994, 1995). For decades now, teacher education institutions have been encouraged to introduce mandatory Aboriginal Studies courses into their curriculum (e.g. Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; Australian Councils of Deans of Education, 1998; Bourke, Dow and Lucas, 1994; Craven, 1999a; 1999b) and teacher education resources have been developed (see Craven, 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1996d; 1996e, 1999c). Over the past 10 years a major historical educational change has taken place in pre-service teacher education in Australian universities. A number of teacher education institutions have included a core Aboriginal Studies subject for pre-service primary teachers undertaking their degree. Until now, the impact of core Aboriginal Studies subjects on teachers' ability and commitment to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum and teach Aboriginal Studies in the classroom had not been critically evaluated

due to the dearth of Aboriginal Studies research in the education sector nationally (see Bin-Sallik, Blomely, Flowers, and Hughes, 1994a, 1994b)

The project that is the basis of this report (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney and Wilson-Miller, in press) employed a synergistic blend of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (telephone interviews and open-ended responses) methods to collect data from primary school teachers across Australia. This paper reports some of the findings emanating from the qualitative component of the project, reporting on the result based upon telephone interviews with teachers in schools and responses to the open-ended question in the survey. The discussion identifies areas of congruence and dissonance in relation to key aims of this component of the study

Aims

The aim of this project was to critically evaluate the impact of Aboriginal Studies primary teacher education courses on practising teachers' abilities to appreciate, understand and effectively teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students in Australian schools.

Participants

Eighteen teachers participated in the telephone interviews, 16 teachers came from New South Wales where Aboriginal Studies is a mandatory cross-curricula perspective. Of the teachers participating in the interviews, the majority were non-Indigenous. The sample includes 13 schools in rural, regional and city locations, which represented a diversity of experience and school settings. In addition to these teachers, the discussion reports on the analysis of open-ended survey questions (see Craven et al., in press).

Results

The Contribution of Pre-service Teacher Education

The study found that without pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies teachers had a lower knowledge base, self-concept and lacked confidence in incorporating Aboriginal Studies perspectives across the curriculum and teaching Aboriginal students. In comparison, teachers who had completed a pre-service course in Aboriginal Studies felt more confident hence, they possessed a higher commitment to teaching Aboriginal Studies in their school. A number of teachers who had undertaken pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies reported that their pre-service training provided invaluable knowledge and skills. Many teachers argued that there was a critical need to introduce mandatory Aboriginal Studies courses. Thus, in the open-ended comments, many teachers criticised the fact that they had not been provided with any pre-service training others felt that their pre-service training was inadequate for their needs. In particular, the open-ended comments noted that, although valuable, elective courses could not ensure that the entire teaching profession was equipped to effectively teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students. Teachers consider both mandatory courses and perspectives across the Key Learning Areas as necessary in teacher education courses and that elective courses were considered largely inappropriate to ensure all teachers are taught Aboriginal Studies.

Benefits of Pre-service Aboriginal Studies for Students in Schools

Many of the teachers who had undertaken a core or an elective Aboriginal Studies teacher education course praised the high standard of their courses. Some mentioned how the courses had impact on their abilities as a teacher, specifically their understanding of appropriate content and strategies, their commitment to teaching Aboriginal Studies and students, their confidence in teaching Aboriginal students and their desire to undertake further postgraduate studies.

Nevertheless, in telephone interviews some participating teachers felt that their students benefited from teachers being aware of all sorts of multicultural issues “not necessarily just being Indigenous”. Strategies for understanding the cultural background of students and learning styles were two of the most frequently mentioned topics that teachers cited as valuable for classroom application. Teachers working with Aboriginal children found their pre-service training particularly valuable. Reflecting the survey findings (see Craven et al., in press), participants in the telephone interviews indicated that their pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies resulted in a general increase in confidence in their capacity to teach Aboriginal Studies, but working with Aboriginal children was also seen as a significant factor in facilitating their understanding of how to teach Aboriginal students. In contrast, several respondents mentioned that “racist and bigoted attitudes” in some schools and communities limited the extent to which they could effectively teach Aboriginal Studies. The troubling existence of such attitudes in schools underlines the value of Aboriginal Studies for advancing the understanding of staff, students and communities, and improving relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and fostering Reconciliation.

The Place of Aboriginal Studies in Schools and in the Curriculum

In spite of the positive pattern of responses, teacher displayed widely different understandings and definitions of the place of Aboriginal Studies in primary school curricula. Some teachers assumed that Aboriginal Studies was important simply because “all schools have to have an Aboriginal Education Policy”. Many acknowledged that Aboriginal Studies was as “an important area of study” as well as a mandatory education policy in NSW, but did not identify translating the policy into practice as a priority or particular responsibility. Analysis of the open-ended responses and interviews found that schools where there were no Aboriginal students reported that Aboriginal Studies was “not given much emphasis” or “was not important because they had no Aboriginal students in their school”.

Several participants suggested that schools and staff were more motivated to place a priority on Aboriginal Studies if Aboriginal students and an Aboriginal community were conspicuous in the local community. The most surprising comments came from a few teachers from schools that had a high proportion of Aboriginal students and where one would expect that Aboriginal Studies would be a priority. These teachers conveyed that, despite of a familiarity of Aboriginal Studies, there was no formal program in their school. The report showed that, whilst teachers acknowledged the formal requirement to incorporate Aboriginal Studies in primary curriculum and expressed the view that Aboriginal Studies should be a mandatory part of the primary school curriculum, the extent of implementation varied widely, and some teachers drew on a range of rationalisations, including the absence of Aboriginal students, to claim exemption from teaching Aboriginal Studies. These responses clearly indicate that a section of the teaching population does not recognise the importance of the goals of the National Aboriginal Education Policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994; 1995) of teaching all Australian students Aboriginal Studies.

The interviews also examined teachers' opinions regarding whether Aboriginal Studies should be offered as a 'separate subject' or a cross-curricula perspective in primary schools. Although responses were spread equally across all participants, several teachers indicated a preference for using both approaches. Responses highlighted a 'crowded curriculum' as impacting on teachers and contributing to them failing to recognise the importance of Aboriginal Studies for all students. Some teachers used the ethnic composition of the school to rationalise the exclusion of Aboriginal Studies and perspectives, this perspective was strongest amongst those who did not teach Aboriginal students.

Teachers presented a range of reasons why Aboriginal Studies is important in the primary school curricula. Some teachers thought Aboriginal Studies was important for overcoming what they believed was a significant area of national ignorance. For example, one teacher explained that Aboriginal Studies was: "A whole part of Australia that most have little knowledge of ... I think not to have knowledge of it is living in ignorance". Another teacher echoed this view by arguing that Aboriginal Studies was important because "all Australian children need the true history of this country". For others, Aboriginal Studies was seen as an important area of study for accomplishing reconciliation and developing a more socially just society so was therefore part of a teacher's "responsibility to ensure people are making informed decisions and choices". For another, Aboriginal Studies was a strategy for addressing racial discrimination. For teachers in schools with a significant numbers of Aboriginal students, there was a belief that Aboriginal Studies was beneficial for Aboriginal students as it gave them knowledge of the experiences of Indigenous other Indigenous peoples from other country's.

The study found that teachers empathise with many of the experiences of Aboriginal Australians. However, the question of whether or not non-Indigenous people should teach Aboriginal Studies was raised. Some teachers felt that there was a possibility that some teachers perpetuated misconceptions and stereotypes about Aboriginal Australia. Teachers also felt that there was a greater need to educate children about how the past has impacted on the present to foster greater understanding of Indigenous Australian society, cultures and values in a contemporary setting.

For a majority of teachers teaching Aboriginal Studies as a perspective across the curriculum was a preferred option, although it was agreed that this response may have been influenced by teachers' familiarity with the model of curriculum 'perspectives' in New South Wales. Teachers who had undertaken pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies indicated a preference for both perspectives across the teacher education curriculum and a separate Aboriginal Studies teacher education subject. The range of responses suggested that pre-service training may increase teachers' openness to a stronger presence for Aboriginal Studies in the curriculum which offers further support for the results emanating from the qualitative component of the study which found that teachers who had completed pre-service training and Aboriginal Studies were more confident and willing to teach Aboriginal Studies in schools (See Craven et al., in press).

Aboriginal Studies and Student Ethnicity

A number of teachers believed that whether or not you taught Aboriginal Studies was dependent on the ethnic makeup of the school population. For example, if schools had no Indigenous students and/or had a high multicultural population, it was thought that Aboriginal Studies should not be a separate subject but part of a broader perspective which included other cultures. In the open-ended responses some teachers expressed negative

views to teaching Aboriginal Studies and argued that Aboriginal Studies should be included into multicultural education. The study also revealed that some teachers who had not undertaken pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies expressed negative opinions that seemed to be based on racism. For example one teacher commented that: “There are too many benefits (funding, teacher aides, courses) for Aboriginal children when other children are just as much in need of these things”. Although, it would be necessary to test the generalisability of this perception across a larger sample, these sorts of comments indicate that some teachers do not understand the special status of Indigenous Australians or the importance of teaching Aboriginal Studies to all Australian students. The prevalence of such views highlights the need for pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies for all Australian teachers.

The Content of Pre-Service Courses

The quantitative survey data revealed that teachers who had undertaken Aboriginal Studies pre-service training had a higher self-concept and capacity to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students than their untrained equivalent (see Craven et al., in press). Self-concept and capacity to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students was further explored in the telephone interviews by asking teachers to describe the Aboriginal Studies content undertaken in their pre-service teacher education course. Teachers, who had completed Aboriginal Studies subjects during their pre-service teacher education course, reported that, course content addressed history, culture, social problems in Indigenous communities, as well as, some aspects of the departmental Aboriginal Education policy, culturally appropriate pedagogy and Aboriginal English. The content varied depending on where teachers had undertaken their initial teaching degrees. A number of teachers reported that history and Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations made up a substantive part of their studies. Only a small number of teachers, who stated that they had had very little contact with Aboriginal people or communities, commented that they had found the Aboriginal history component of their courses invaluable to their understanding of Aboriginal culture and social situation. Most teachers however, found that over emphasis on history was not relevant and expressed that they would have rather been taught practical knowledge, skills and resources relevant to teaching Aboriginal Studies in schools. Overall, teachers felt that pre-service courses in Aboriginal Studies would better prepare them by concentrating on practical applications for teaching Aboriginal Studies content and pedagogy for teaching Aboriginal students in schools. Teachers were also asked to rate the extent to which their pre-service training helped teachers build their knowledge of Aboriginal Studies, twelve of the eighteen participants in the telephone interviews rated their pre-service training as ‘low’. These teachers cited a number of issues such as: the material was ‘tokenistic’ or presented in a biased and controversial way. These comments highlight the need for a review of Aboriginal Studies subjects in primary teacher education courses.

Aboriginal Studies and Reconciliation

Teachers who had undertaken a core course reported that their pre-service training made them more aware of the need to foster reconciliation and that this gave them more confidence to make more informed choices about how and what to teach in their classes. Overall, the strategies teachers used to foster reconciliation were related less to pre-service training and more to individual school type in relation to: the presence of an Aboriginal student population, and the infrastructures and support provided in schools with high Aboriginal student numbers that enabled a greater focus on the use of more concrete strategies in classrooms. This general pattern, underlines the powerful mediating role of school context on teaching practice and the need for teacher education to work closely with schools and systems

to ensure parallel priorities and outcomes for the profession. Consequently, teachers who felt equipped to teach in culturally appropriate ways often felt this way because they currently had the support of an Aboriginal Education Officer, or some other specialist, who gave assistance in the classroom.

Capacity and Confidence to Teach Aboriginal Children

Several teachers without pre-service teacher education expressed the view that they were teachers first and foremost and that teaching Aboriginal children was no different from teaching any other children. A significant variable in regards to teachers' feelings of confidence and competence to teach Aboriginal students was the presence of Aboriginal students in the classroom and the size of the local Aboriginal community. As a general rule, teachers in schools with a larger Aboriginal population felt relatively confident because of the substantial support in terms of the local Aboriginal Education Assistant. Teachers with classes with a low number of Aboriginal children in their schools expressed feelings of a lack of confidence, as there was often less support. These comments highlight the importance of the role of Aboriginal Education Assistants mediating teaching practice.

Working With Community

The study found that support by the principal and school executive were critical to the effectiveness of the local Aboriginal community participation in schools. One teacher described how the actions of the principal had built positive relations with the community, supported staff in developing their skills as teachers of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students, and facilitated the creation of a school culture that was actively supportive of Aboriginal culture and identity. While others teachers in schools where there were no Aboriginal students reported that this was not an issue of priority for the school or its senior staff.

While some teachers spoke about the benefits they experienced from visiting and interacting with Aboriginal communities and organizations, and how this helped them feel more confident in interacting with local Aboriginal communities, many others reported that they had none or very little information about working with Aboriginal consultants and communities and noted that their studies focused only on Aboriginal society, culture and history. Consequently, participants identified the need for pre-service courses to address strategies to work with communities

The Department of Education's Mandatory Aboriginal Studies Requirements

Although Aboriginal Studies is a mandatory perspective in NSW schools, the majority of teachers reported that although they knew that there was an Aboriginal Studies policy most stated that they had learned little or nothing about it during their pre-service teacher education. One participant stated that they had never seen the Aboriginal Education Policy. Overall teachers felt this component of their studies was 'Not covered well enough', another teacher stated, 'I don't feel confident knowing what is mandatory and what is not'. This finding highlights the importance for pre-service courses to familiar all pre-service teachers with policy documents that are designed to provide the principles and guidelines for practice in schools.

Areas Teachers Lack Confidence in Addressing Aboriginal Studies

Although the study identified no consistent pattern or trend in the responses by participant to areas where they felt they lacked confidence in teaching Aboriginal Studies. Teachers did report a range issues such as lack of resources, or 'hands-on' activities for use with children,

difficulty accessing Aboriginal consultants because they were overstretched, and difficulty ensuring a consistent approach in schools because of high staff turn over. The lack of available resources was the most frequently cited concern by teachers. The area most teachers felt that they lacked confidence in was teaching about Aboriginal lifestyle, culture and values. In contrast, most felt comfortable with teaching topics such as history, stories, art and music.

When asked about teaching Aboriginal students, participants identified a range of other forms of support that they felt would help them in becoming more effective. Nearly half the participants agreed assistance from Aboriginal Education Assistants, visits to the school by Elders, more government funding and support from their principal and school executive were important in the teaching context. In contrast, the other half of participants felt that they needed to expand their own knowledge base and expertise through further professional development or university study. Teachers who felt they were doing well were generally located in a school with a high Aboriginal population and greater support for Aboriginal Studies generally. In contrast, teachers in schools where there was less official support expressed a greater desire for increased funding, “more mandatory” courses, stronger principal support, and improved resources. Whilst responsibility for the provision and distribution of support lies with education systems and sectors, the strong message from participants in the study is a desire to enhance their expertise in Aboriginal Studies.

Suggested Future Directions for Pre-Service and Practicing Teachers

Participants offered a range of useful suggestions for enhancing teacher education courses. In particular they felt strongly that teachers needed more support to teach Aboriginal Studies. Improvements teachers identified for Aboriginal Studies pre-service education subjects were: courses that challenge racist attitudes and negative values; a stronger focus on pedagogy and practical applications for teaching Aboriginal Studies; and incorporating Indigenous perspectives across all of the Key Learning Areas. They also felt that pre-service courses could benefit by including opportunities to work with Indigenous children and communities during practice teaching as this would better prepare them to teach Aboriginal children. Teachers emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development. The analysis found that teachers who undertook an Aboriginal Studies course in their pre-service training were more likely to undertake further such courses as a component of postgraduate studies and teachers who had undertaken such courses were more effectively prepared to teach Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Studies compared to teachers who had not undertaken such courses. In contrast, and reinforcing the survey findings, several teachers from the control group expressed the view that their lack knowledge reduced their confidence to teach Aboriginal Studies and that further professional development was needed to redress this lack. Many education departments do offer some form of professional development in Aboriginal Studies however, although there was a strong desire amongst participants for further professional development opportunities and support, not all teachers were able to access these programs. The findings of both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study highlight that inadequate pre-service training and on-going professional development has a negative impact on teachers’ capacity, willingness and ability teach Aboriginal Studies and effectively teach Aboriginal students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interview data showed, that while pre-service training in Aboriginal Studies was thought to lay the groundwork and was seen as an important starting point for teachers in schools. The study revealed that the ethnic composition of the school influenced how teachers thought about teaching Aboriginal Studies. Hence, teachers in schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students tended to place a greater emphasis on teaching Aboriginal Studies, either as a separate subject or as perspectives. They also indicated that they had more support from within the school and their Department of Education in terms of resources, community involvement, and assistance from Aboriginal Education workers. On the whole, teachers in schools with few or no Aboriginal students had a lower emphasis on teaching Aboriginal Studies. This lack of commitment by teachers from such schools, indicated that Aboriginal Studies is a part of the curriculum that is often forgotten or given superficial attention when there is not a substantive Aboriginal student population or active Aboriginal community in the school. The findings draw attention to the cultural problems confronted by a non-Aboriginal teacher teaching Aboriginal Studies in isolation, and the need for support from upper management for successful implementation of Aboriginal Studies within schools. It also highlights that although Aboriginal Studies is a mandatory policy, which requires all schools to incorporate a cross-curricula perspective, that a significant number of students in Australian schools are not being taught Aboriginal Studies.

The qualitative data supported the findings in the quantitative surveys and found that, a number of participants felt that their pre-service training did not adequately equip them to teach Aboriginal Studies in schools or teach Aboriginal students. In general, teachers indicated that the content of Aboriginal Studies in their pre-service courses focused too much on Aboriginal history and that there was a greater need to teach pedagogical skills that enable teachers to translate knowledge and content into effective teaching practice and student outcomes. In particular, teachers felt they needed a greater emphasis on being taught to understand and implement mandatory policies. Respondents also highlighted the need for Aboriginal Studies education to be delivered in more sensitive ways by staff that were familiar with the requirements of pre-service teachers and the educational tools they needed to utilise in their professional practice. These findings indicate the need for a critical, evaluation of Aboriginal Studies courses in primary pre-service teacher education. It also highlights the urgent need for pre-service institutions to develop courses that addresses the areas of concern identified by teachers in the current study.

The teachers in the study indicated that they needed greater support for the teaching of Aboriginal Studies both in terms of the school context and in terms of further professional development. Similarly, analysis of the survey findings found that there was a lack of self-concept and confidence in teachers teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students. The study shows that Aboriginal Studies requires a re assessment by policy-makers, the education sectors and funding agencies so that teachers can undertake further professional development and be better prepared to teach their students and all Australians.

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