



# THE IMPACT OF HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY EVENTS ON THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES, CULTURE AND HISTORIES INTO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

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**Abstract:** The lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people have been greatly impacted by the historic and contemporary events and issues, particularly the impact of colonisation, ‘Stolen Generations’, ‘The Apology’ and ‘Reconciliation Action Plan’ (RAP) providing an insight into the contemporary educational context for Indigenous Australian people. These events and issues provide a clear explanation that why it is necessary to empower Aboriginal people through education by embedding their perspectives into the current Australian education. The essay will sophisticatedly explain the current educational context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and how the decisions of past and present authorities have influenced this context. The essay will also explain the importance of integrating Aboriginal perspectives, culture and histories into the Australian curriculum and education as a reconciliation strategy to bridge the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and to acknowledge their sufferings as the result of their dispossession by the white Australians. The strategies to embed those perspectives will also be discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Reconciliation Action Plan, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, strategies.

## 1. Introduction:

In order to work upon the strategy of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in all the contexts including education, the Australian government has proposed the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy on 18th September 2015. The aim of this strategy is to give honour and respect to the Australian’s oldest generation, their culture, language and histories through education and to assist them in further employment pathways (Education Council, 2015). Similarly, Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has been given command to include Aboriginal histories and culture in all the learning areas as a cross- curriculum priorities (price, 2012). “The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority provides an opportunity for all young Australians to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, knowledge traditions and holistic world views” (The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2018, version 8.4). In the current educational context, these initiatives work as a closing a gap between Indigenous People and white Australians and to give Indigenous people, a true sense of belonging and attachment. It also helps Indigenous

People to increase their self-esteem and well-being so that they could prosper in education and employment like all the other white Australians. Moreover, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards have also included standards in relation to the better outcome of Aboriginal people education (Price, 2012). For instance: the Standard 2 – ‘Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages’ (AITSL, 2011, p. 5) is another step to equip teachers with knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal histories, so that they can teach students with involvement and engagement. Despite the government efforts of closing the gap, the Indigenous People are still not achieving the same education goals as those of non-Indigenous people because of the barriers to Indigenous education. The most common barriers include inappropriate teaching materials, resources and context, not enough Aboriginal history, few Aboriginal teachers, disengaged teachers, uneducated parents or their bad school memories, poverty and lack of infrastructure in remote areas (AIHW, 2014). These factors lead to the highest non-attendance rates and the lowest literacy and numeracy levels of Aboriginal students in Australia (Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017). Despite their less engagement in education, the Australian government is putting all efforts to close this educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

## **2. Literature Review:**

The main reason behind the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children is the historical and contemporary events. The British Colonisation and ‘Stolen Generations’, ‘The ‘Apology’ and RAP have a strong impact on Aboriginals’ education. The education for Aboriginals is greatly influenced by the different policies, Acts and legislations since 1788 until now. The two main events, the British colonisation and ‘Stolen Generations’ have left the trauma for the entire Indigenous generation. During those times, the Aboriginal children had suffered acute discrimination, exclusion, segregation and even separation from their families (Steinberg, 2013). Even in 1883, as the result of colonisation, the Aboriginal children excluded from the public school by the Education Minister followed by the request of the white parents (Creative Spirit, n.d). The passing of NSW Aborigines Protection Act in 1909 has given more power to NSW Protection Board to remove children from their families to train them as a domestic servant when the era of ‘Stolen Generations’ started. The Stolen Generation had a long-lasting impact on Indigenous people (Harrison, 2011). The Aboriginal children could not get the best education until 1950s -1960s when the era of Stolen Generation ended and the Assimilation policy has given permission to Aboriginal children to assimilate in NSW schools if the white parents agreed (Creative Spirit, n.d). In 1970s, after passing of Referendum and entering in the era of integration, schools in NSW were no longer allowed to exclude Aboriginal children from the schools. But Aboriginal children were badly discriminated and abused within white Australians and they could not get the same level of education as those of white Australian children because of low self-esteem and ‘Stolen Generation s’ Trauma. They were victims of ‘Silent Apartheid’ because they had witnessed the suppression of their culture and language (Rose, 2015). This era also led to the formation of varied Aboriginal Education policies on state and territory level. With the assistance of National Collaborative Curriculum Project, the Australian Education Council (AEC) has integrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in eight key learning areas and provided resources for teachers to get knowledge about these studies (Price, 2012). Finally, in 2008, the Government of Australia finally recognized the plight and suffering of Aboriginals, especially the trauma of ‘Stolen Generations’. ‘The Apology’ has changed depressed scenario of Aboriginal lives. The Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Indigenous people for the past government’s policies and brutal action of removing children from parents in a public speech (Maddison, 2011). Established in 2001, The RAP campaign initiated in all the platforms. The aim of this campaign is to close the gap between Indigenous and non- Indigenous people in all the platforms including health, education and workplace and to give respect and make healthy relationships with Aboriginal people (Reconciliation Action Plan, n.d). Similarly, the Australian Human Rights Commission has initiated another campaign ‘Close the Gap’ to give equal health rights to Indigenous people (Human rights, 2018). The positive atmosphere of social and political events in Australia has paved path for better educational context of Indigenous education. In 2008, the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) has declared that it values Aboriginal histories and culture in Australian education (MCEECDYA, 2008). All these historical and political events have contributed to Indigenous education, leading towards the embedment of Aboriginal culture as a cross curriculum priorities in ACARA.

Indigenous perspective means the culture, history, language, the way of thinking, and doing things by indigenous people. In order to embed these perspectives in education, it is immensely important for teachers to get knowledge

of them. For instance, Indigenous people have a strong belief in kin and clan relationships with each other and with their land and the environment. Their culture has been built on strong relatedness with people, land, sea and spirituality and is linked to learning (Kitson & Bowes, 2010). They have connected spirituality with land. Dreamtime is another important part of their learning which tells the stories about land and its people, seas and skies. Aboriginal people have got the deep interest and knowledge of astronomy which they have expressed through dreamtime stories explaining the tides, eclipses, stars and the different timings of shining of sun and moon. The yarning circle in Aboriginal culture is a centuries old tradition of sharing and passing knowledge to the next generation. It builds respectful relationships while learning.

It is very important to have a clear understanding and respect for Australia's Indigenous people, their beliefs, histories, culture and languages. The initiative of embedding Indigenous perspective into the current educational context is considered as an act of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This is the best way to promote the participation of Aboriginals in the mainstream Australia and to improve their attendance, capabilities and work placement involvement (AIHW, 2014). Incorporating Indigenous stories into the Australian curriculum and teaching about their histories and perspectives has been considered nation-wide as an approach of improving better outcomes for indigenous people and to respect and acknowledge them (Shipp, 2013). It is also very important for non-Indigenous students to have an accurate knowledge of Indigenous histories. Australians have been taught in their classrooms that Captain James Cook discovered Australia in 1788. They have not been taught how the British people have created havoc in Aboriginals lives to establish Australia. The reason for integrating Aboriginal histories in education is to acknowledge the sacrifices and hardships of Indigenous people through teaching of their perspectives such as their way of thinking, doing and being. It is mentioned in the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DET) Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) that children are connected and belonged to their culture and this belonging shapes who they are and what they can become (DET, 2019). By incorporating and accepting diversity such as Aboriginal culture in early years help children to develop confidence on their capabilities so that they can reach to their full potential. There are many ways to incorporate Indigenous perspective into the primary classroom. The first and foremost way is to adopt an anti-bias curriculum which focuses on embracing and appreciating different cultures in the classroom. It is not like a tourist curriculum which focuses on the one-day celebration of a special festival but it gives more exposure to children about understanding different cultures (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2011). The aim of the anti-bias curriculum is to reflect diverse experiences and perspectives, instructional methods suitable for all the students to create a safe and inclusive learning community. Likewise, the Indigenous Education Language program in different states within Australia is another approach of embedding Indigenous perspective into the current education context. In Victoria Gippsland, Bruthen Primary School has started teaching Krunai language by the Traditional Owner Nikkie Hood (DET, Victoria, 2019). Likewise, Professional development of teachers and their learning of Aboriginal histories and language will help them to get better outcomes of Aboriginal students. Moreover, the involvement of Aboriginal people such as parents, families and elderly community members will benefit schools in embedding Indigenous perspectives. Another strategy to integrate Indigenous perspectives in the classroom is to follow a paradigm called "8ways" which was developed to give educators a framework to help them in creating an un-offensive learning experiences while avoiding tokenism. It will also help white Australians' children to better understand Aboriginal culture and histories. The "8 ways" framework is made up of eight pedagogies: learning and sharing of knowledge through narrative, non-verbal communication, arts, objects and scaffolding. It also includes lessons from land and nature (Tangient LLC., 2013). The examples of 8 way learning in the classroom are the story telling traditions or oral narratives, hands-on problem-solving maths activities, exploring unspoken values and ethical issues in content, learning without words by using hands, the use of visuals and creating symbols for helping students to understand, remember content, and kitchen gardening . Teacher can model every activity for students, promoting an Aboriginal protocol of "Watch first, then do". Healesville High School has launched an app of Aboriginal Dreamtime stories where students learn beautifully told traditional stories through artwork and pictures, they also learn elements and how to say them in Wurundjeri (Fuse Education, n.d). Many schools in Australia are implementing yarning circles for students as a means of sharing knowledge among them. In Victoria, Elisabeth Murdoch College adopted yarning circle in 2019 with the Koori youth council (Elisabeth Murdoch College, 2020).

### **3. Findings and Conclusions:**

All such teaching strategies will build a learning environment that acknowledges cultures that are important to the Australian history. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will feel proud of themselves and their culture when it will be given appreciation in the classroom (ACARA, 2018, v.8.4). There are few more ideas to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in the classroom daily such as:

Starting the day by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land the school is on.

Finding out how to say hello or good morning in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders language and greet students in language.

To conclude, the essay has elaborated very well the impact of historic and contemporary events on the current educational context of Aboriginal education. The British colonisation and ‘Stolen Generation’s impacts have been discussed as the historical events and how they shaped their lives. Likewise, it has also been discussed how the formal apology and RAP have contributed to bring back Aboriginal people’s lost rights and respect in Australia. Moreover, the essay has explained Aboriginal people perspectives and the importance of embedding them into the Australian curriculum as a means of decreasing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The strategies such as anti-bias curriculum, yarning circle, 8 ways pedagogy and learning Aboriginal languages by students and teachers have also been discussed and how schools and teachers should implement them to give honour to Aboriginals’ culture, histories and heritage.

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