# First Nations views on tackling racism and bias in learning and teaching

## Inclusive Education Community of Practice – Office of Indigenous Strategy and Innovation panel discussion

Prof Mark Rose (moderator), Denise Charles, Deb Milera, Sandra Brogden and Ilona Rose-Sliwa

### Notes from the discussion by Mary Dracup

#### Does racism exist in Australian education and if so, in what forms?

Racism ‘includes all the barriers that prevent people from enjoying dignity and equality because of their race’. Given this definition, a host of statistics indicate that racism certainly exists in Australia. These include incarceration rates (a young Aboriginal person is more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system than finishing high school), 432 Aboriginal deaths in custody since 1991, a suicide rate twice that of non-Aboriginal Australians, and median household income 1/3 lower. A recent ANU report found ¾ respondents had implicit negative bias against Aboriginal Australians.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the US has attracted a lot of attention in Australia but few Australians even know the names of any of the 432 Aboriginal people who have died in custody since 1991. Historical evidence shows Scott Morrison’s assertion that Australia has not had slavery is simply wrong. Many Aboriginal people today have close connections to people who have been subject to slavery.

Being told to ‘just get over’ trauma is difficult when it occurred so recently—and is still continuing. Racism from teachers to students is especially traumatic and can last a lifetime, but truth-telling is the starting point for healing. Only 2% of teachers are Aboriginal so cultural competence work can’t just be left to Aboriginal educators. Aboriginal people can’t stamp out racism on their own but need the wider non-Aboriginal community to work together with them to bring about change.

#### What practices will create change?

Change needs to be systemic. We need to go beyond just acknowledging Country, or the ‘cultural Kontiki tour’ approach. Our responsibility as educators is to teach the real history of Australia, including Aboriginal history. Most people know very little of this, yet it is part of our shared history as Australians. People need to know their *local* Aboriginal history and culture, not just what they might learn on field trips to other places. There is a rich Aboriginal history where all of us live.

Embedding First Nations knowledge in curriculum is vital so that our students will graduate with a confident knowledge of the Aboriginal history of this country and have respect for the culture. This is what the Office of Indigenous Strategy and Innovation at Deakin is starting to work on in the GLO8 program, in partnership with local Aboriginal leaders.

Cultural competence around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture deserves greater attention than broad multicultural competence, due to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s unique position and history in Australian culture. It’s not about blaming and shaming, but acknowledging the wrongs of the past and their impact on people today, and ensuring those wrongs are not repeated. Building unity around a shared national identity is the end goal.

Ilona Rose-Sliwa shared the following practical strategies for building cultural competence, which all educators can use:

* Embed Aboriginal perspectives into all areas of the curriculum - not just through the humanities, not stand alone units of work, bring Aboriginal perspectives into your daily discourse and practice.
* Maintain high expectations of students—they know when you dumb down the curriculum for them and they rise to the expectations set for them
* Use resources that are truth telling—don’t allow resources that brush over or skew the facts
* Self-educate—read articles, books, access websites such as [Narragunnawali](https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/) reconciliation organisation to build your own knowledge
* Adopt a strength based approach—focus on what Aboriginal students bring to the system, rather than how they can fit into the system.
* Engage in pedagogy that makes learning meaningful and relevant to Aboriginal students. Give students a voice in this, let them be part of the process.
* Build relationships with community members—promoting mutual respect and valuing reciprocal contributions
* Explore current issues that impact Aboriginal people today—build empathy. Be willing to have tough conversations.
* Reflect on your own unconscious and implicit bias when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The GROW coaching model is very effective. The very nature of building cultural competence is personal; it requires a deep awareness of our own identity, examining our own biases, prejudice and privilege, while increasing knowledge and understanding of cultures other than our own. We understand that this can be quite confronting for some people but very worthwhile.
* Source Professional Learning that builds cultural competency and maintain this momentum by regular engagement.

Building cultural competence also requires promoting empathy among students and creating respectful, safe learning spaces. It involves cultural responsiveness, acting bravely when issues arise: fear of doing the wrong thing resulting in doing nothing is really damaging.

#### What is one thing you’d like to see to bring about change?

Denise Charles: We need to care enough to do something about the systemic racism in this country. For a start, we need to learn words in our local Aboriginal languages, and learn more of the Aboriginal stories that are embedded in the places, language and songs that have been passed down for thousands of generations. Aboriginal stories record history that dates back to when megafauna were alive, before the last Ice Age. Why are they not more widely known in mainstream Australia? Mainstream Australia needs to take on this responsibility. Change means working together as equals to create the kind of Australia we want.

Deb Milera: I’d like to see more non-Indigenous people be brave enough to stand up and walk beside Aboriginal people in the education, justice, family violence and health spaces to work together to improve the terrible statistics for Aboriginal people. Change has to come from leaders but we can’t wait for them, we all need to be brave enough to tackle racism and tell the truth. Let’s change the script to make things better for our kids.

Ilona Rose-Sliwa: There are pockets of best practice but it’s not consistent. I’d like to see teachers being accountable for what they are teaching, and that requires giving them time and resources to develop their practice.

Sandra Brogden: The place to start is conversation—we can’t always be afraid of having uncomfortable conversations—we need to have these conversations and grow through them if we’re to have a good relationship eventually.

From the Q&A:

* A [pedagogy of discomfort](https://ezproxy.deakin.edu.au/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=122408827&site=eds-live) can be productive in terms of challenging racism.
* Deakin (NIKERI) has a suite of IND elective units that teach cultural competence. Social Work has made IND101 a core unit and others are encouraged to do the same. Opportunities for professional staff to take these units would also be valuable.
* How can non-Indigenous people step up and use Indigenous language without being inappropriate? The Office of Indigenous Strategy and Innovation’s GLO8 development program will include developing knowledge and also how to use and teach it.
* How can we teach about Indigenous content without being overwhelmed with negatives? There are so many negative stories that need to be told; but there are also lots of positive stories about Aboriginal people and culture. For example, Aboriginal people were the first bakers and astronomers in the world. These stories need to be told so that non-Aboriginal people recognise the complexity and sophistication of Aboriginal cultures.
* Content that is negative about Aboriginal history can trigger feelings of shame and trauma for Aboriginal students. Safety mechanisms need to be used to protect them from further harm, such as alerting them beforehand that sensitive material may be coming up and giving them the option to not participate if they wish, and checking in with them after difficult conversations.