



Submission to the AITSL national
consultation addressing

*Indigenous cultural competency in
the Australian teaching workforce*

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Submission: - AITSL's *Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce* project

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the one voice for every child in public education in Australia. As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to AITSL's *Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce* project.

ACSSO is committed to access, equality, equity of outcomes, excellence, and participatory democracy.

It is ACSSO's position that:

- All learning takes place within the cultural framework of the learner, a reality that is often unacknowledged in educational policy and practice.
- Indigenous Australian teachers and other Aboriginal school personnel are best placed to understand the cultural frameworks and languages of Indigenous Australian students.
- Indigenous Australian children suffer educational disadvantage because their cultural background is not taken into account in the learning process

ACSSO acknowledges the essential need to ensure the direct experience of students and families informs the national dialogue and has utilised its networks in the development of this submission.

In developing our submission, we have done so on the premise that cultural competence is: -

- the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures;
- being aware of one's own world view;
- developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences; and
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views.

Most people are aware of the statistics that indicate significant educational and social disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Indigenous youth do not graduate from school at the same rate as non-Indigenous youth. These realities are extremely concerning —as they should be. What is also important though, is the context in which these inequities occur, namely, the way social, historical, political, and economic factors have shaped and continue to shape Indigenous peoples' education.

The AITSL discussion paper asked us to reflect on what a culturally competent teaching workforce looked like?

When we talk about being culturally competent, many of us think about "celebrating diversity." ACSSO submits that a culturally competent teaching workforce, has awareness and understanding of the social and historical contexts, as well as the structural and interpersonal power imbalances, that shape the education and educational experiences of Indigenous students and people of different cultures. When referring to different cultures we need to remember that culture is often thought of in terms of ethnic or national groups, but we can also look at cultures, within or beyond ethnic groups, in terms of race, gender, sexuality, abilities, or class. A person may belong to many cultures and so these ways of looking at culture will naturally intersect. It is important too to examine "invisible" cultures. For example, what is the culture of academia? ACSSO would assert the AITSL discussion paper had been developed for the academic environment.

Developing cultural competency includes examining our own biases and developing the willingness to learn and be educated from a different point of view. The Teaching workforce needs to understand the lived experiences of many Indigenous people, and needs to know the "colonial context," the historical and conceivably ongoing process of "White Australia" domination over Indigenous peoples and their lands to attain the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to be able to work in more effective, empathetic and respectful ways with Indigenous students and people of different cultures.

Eliminating indigenous and ethnic educational inequities requires addressing inequities which includes institutionalised racism and ensuring Australia's education system is appropriate and equitable.

There is growing recognition of the importance of cultural competency and/or cultural safety to achieve an equitable education system. Some jurisdictions have included or are attempting to include cultural competency in teaching professional accreditation standards, and pre-service and in-service training programmes. However, as identified in the AITSL discussion paper there are mixed definitions and understandings of cultural competency, and how best to achieve it.

ACSSO appreciates the discussion regarding the definition of cultural competency (p. 6) about "listening to the needs and aspirations of students and their families." We acknowledge the importance of listening, indeed, as Palmer posits, "A simple truth, the human soul does not want to be fixed. It simply wants to be seen and heard."¹ It will be through active listening to the stories of these students and their families that schools and broader communities can learn the lesson of the past and use them to inform the development and enrichment of the students of the future.

ACSSO applauds the drive to ensure schools have the capacity to build strong and mutually respectful relationships with local community and individual response to students, families, and wider communities.

We suggest strengthening the terminology here to "actively engage, collaborate and consult with families and their wider communities" in order to move this from a passive to an active process.

Health Victoria in their [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety framework](#) state that Cultural safety is about creating an environment that is safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This means there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity and experience².

ACSSO sees this as a critical component in the creation of a culturally competent workforce.

In Australia, past efforts to increase levels of a culturally competent teaching workforce would appear to have been largely designed for specific situations.

There seems to have been an absence of a coherent approach to its inclusion in or teaching for pre-service and in-service training programmes. Other than the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) [National Quality Framework](#) (NQF) there would appear to be a lack of national standards for the provision of cultural competency. ACSSO believes this reflects the apparent lack of Australian specific evidence about what strategies are most effective for developing a culturally competent teaching workforce.

¹ Palmer, P. J. (2012). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life.* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

² <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/aboriginal-health/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-cultural-safety>

ACSSO believes that cultural awareness training is not enough in itself.

- While cultural awareness training might be expected to impart knowledge that will develop a behavioural change, it does not appear to have been effective when it is delivered in isolation or rapidly delivered over short timeframes.
- Gaining cultural competence is not a quick fix, it is a lifelong journey that begins with a positive mental commitment to identifying your own cultural identities and beliefs.
- The expectation that the teaching workforce should be comfortable sharing cultural experiences can be intimidating. However, sharing what we know and what we have learned allows us to embed and process our past experiences. Both good and bad endeavours can offer a wealth of information, but sometimes it takes reliving it from another angle to realise lessons learned. Sharing these situations can help others gain a fresh perspective and avoid pitfalls.
- There appears to be no homogenous approach to developing and implementing cultural competence in the teaching workforce, who need to understand the “lived” experiences of Indigenous people.
- Programs need to be developed and delivered in partnership with and input from local Indigenous people
- Validation indicators need to be identified to measure what works in efforts to create a culturally competent workforce.

For Australia as a nation, cultural competence (and safety) in its teaching workforce is a practical act of reconciliation.