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# Non-Indigenous Initial Teacher Education students navigating the cultural interface

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## ABSTRACT

Despite strong policy impetus to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content across all levels of education in Australia, it is frequently reported that these aims are not being met. Settler ignorance and resistance are key contributing factors. However, recently, in our experiences teaching Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses in the university sector, we found students who are, without being required to, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into their lesson plans, representing a shift from this dominant discourse about teachers and students. In this small-scale qualitative study, we sought to expand the dialogue from why non-Indigenous teachers *do not* include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content to a strengths-based understanding of why others *do*. Using 'yarning' approaches we interviewed four non-Indigenous ITE students to understand the factors that shaped their decisions and how they navigated the cultural interface. We put forward that students felt morally compelled to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lessons. They were deeply concerned with ethics, actively positioned themselves as 'learners' and privileged First Nations voices to mitigate their positioning as non-Indigenous teachers. We conclude with implications for policy responses and questions about institutional responsibility.

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## Introduction

In Australia, there is strong policy impetus to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>1</sup> content into the curriculum at all levels of education – early childhood to tertiary. This policy push is not surprising, given that it is frequently reported that these minimum standards are not being met, and that many educators do not include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the curriculum with a number of reasons cited including a lack of knowledge, fear and the value placed on such knowledge (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, O'Dowd, 2010, Shipp, 2013). University practices are also blamed (Hogarth, 2022, Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012).

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Using settler ignorance and resistance and Nakata's (2007a, 2007b) theory of the cultural interface as interpretative frameworks, we analysed the stories of four non-Indigenous ITE students (three females; one male) in their final year of a two-year Master of Teaching degree at a university located in Perth, Western Australia (W.A.), to develop an understanding of the reasons why some non-Indigenous ITE students *are* including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lesson plans. All participants were aged in their late 20s and three identified as being Australian from settler ancestry (e.g. Welsh, Scottish), whilst the other had recently migrated to Australia from Central Asia. Our small-scale qualitative study offers detailed insight into why and how non-Indigenous ITE students include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lessons. The insight gained from these perspectives can potentially inform the teaching policies and practices required to move the profession forward and toward better meeting policy objectives.

## Policy push

Developing graduates' cultural capabilities is a widely stated aim of the Australian university system and this is particularly the case for graduates of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) degrees who are required to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways. In this section, we focus on the dual drivers of policy relevant to our study: university directives, and those set by governing bodies within the field of teacher education.

Within the university sector, developing 'Indigenous cultural competency' has been a focus through the *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (UA, 2011a) and the *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (UA, 2011b). More recently, the first sector-wide Universities Australia (2017) *Indigenous Strategy* committed all universities to develop 'Indigenous Graduate Attributes' by 2020. This target was approached with some ambivalence across the sector (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022), and its newest iteration focuses on 'ensuring that commitment to principles translates consistently into concrete actions and outcomes' (UA, 2022, p. 17).

Our university is based in an urban city, on Whadjuk Nyungar Boodjar [land], but has a large online presence across Australia. Its graduate capabilities acknowledge its locality, and graduates are expected to 'have an applied understanding of local First Peoples' "katajininy warniny" (translated from the Nyungar language as "ways of being, knowing and doing") (Curtin University, n.d.). Additionally, within the School of Education, educators are tasked with preparing ITE students (pre-service teachers) to meet the requirements for teacher professional registration and the mandated curriculum.

Teachers in the Australian schooling system are required to teach and embed the cross-curriculum priority (CCP) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in all learning areas e.g. English, Science etc (ACARA, 2023). The knowledge and skills that teachers must possess to do this are mandated in, and measured by, nationally recognised teacher standards, the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (APSTs) (AITSL, 2017). Teachers are required to demonstrate strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (APST 1.4) and their understanding and respect for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (APST 2.4) to meet these standards. Recent AITSL publications focussed on building a culturally responsive teaching workforce (see AITSL, 2022a, 2022b) signal growing concern about the cultural capabilities of teachers.

These policies are not without criticism. The CCP has been critiqued for its structural incoherence due to the bite-size snippets of learning about First Nations knowledges that are scattered throughout the curriculum rather than being presented as a holistic and interconnected system of knowledge (Lowe & Galstaun, 2020). Further, in this ‘add-on’ approach, First Nations knowledges are viewed only through the prism of western knowledge, and not as a legitimate area of study in its own right (Burgess & Lowe, 2022, Lowe & Galstaun, 2020, Weuffen et al., 2023a). Moodie and Patrick (2017) argue that the APSTs ‘are both framed and interpreted in a way indicative of the cultural turn that marginalises engagement with the political dimensions of Indigenous experiences in the colonial settler state’ (p. 440).

The policy push described represents Fraser’s (2001) ‘cultural recognition’ as a form of social justice designed to redress educational inequalities related to the inclusion/exclusion of cultural knowledge in schooling (Keddie, 2012). However, this is just one element of Nancy Fraser’s tripartite social justice model that consists of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Keddie, 2012). Additionally, research suggests policies aimed at cultural recognition are not only met with resistance, but there are also distinct challenges to their implementation in settler colonial systems that risk racism and inequality being perpetuated rather than eradicated (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, Harvey & Russell-Mundine, 2019, Moodie & Patrick, 2017).

### **Settler ignorance and resistance**

Despite the significant policy push, it has been argued that little has changed across all sectors of education as policy visions fail to translate into practice (Burgess & Lowe, 2022, Hogarth, 2022, Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). Furthermore, even when policy is enacted through practice, positive outcomes cannot be assumed to follow naturally (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022). Consequently, both accountability and critical reflexivity are simultaneously required to navigate this complex space that is marred by settler ignorance and resistance.

A lack of knowledge, and the value placed on such knowledge, fear of offending, an unwillingness to take risks, and poor prior educational experiences are widely cited reasons for these failed policy outcomes (Anderson et al., 2020, Bishop et al., 2021, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012, O’Dowd, 2010, Shipp, 2013). These reasons can extend to outright resistance and hostility from students (Anderson et al., 2020). For example, instances of students questioning their lecturers’ Indigeneity have been reported (Macdonald et al., 2023). More commonly, students describe feeling blamed, attacked, or confronted in response to learning about Australia’s colonial history and its ongoing legacy and consequently, behave defensively (Anderson et al., 2020, Hollinsworth, 2016, Phillips, 2019). These mixed and often conflicting feelings of guilt, sadness, anger, and fear are inextricably related to settler ignorance and resistance (Rice et al., 2022).

Settler ignorance is not necessarily a ‘deficiency of knowledge’ but rather, ‘ignorance might be thought of as a surfeit of a particular kind of knowing produced by dominant

settler groups, who create omissions and misconceptions in knowledge systems, undermining the credibility of Indigenous peoples and upholding their own knowledge claims as objective and true' (Rice et al., 2022, p. 18). Settler resistance promotes and reinforces settler ignorance through an unwillingness to know (Hollinsworth, 2016, Rice et al., 2022). In Australia, conversations about race tend to be viewed as socially awkward and are consequently stifled, creating space for settler ignorance and resistance to prevail (Hollinsworth, 2016).

University practices are also seen to perpetuate settler ignorance and resistance (Hogarth, 2022, Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). These views are often tied to the broader epistemic violence of settler colonialism that is associated with educational systems (Brown, 2018, Weuffen et al., 2023a). The mechanics of settler colonialism are evident in the discourses that frequently refer to anything to do with First Nations peoples as a 'tick box' exercise (Anderson et al., 2020, Bishop et al., 2021). Given the lack of value institutionally ascribed to First Nations knowledges, combined with a lack of institutional accountability to ensure graduate cultural capabilities are met, it is not surprising that practices often remain unchanged (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022).

Consequently, many teachers enter the classroom underprepared to teach First Nations students or content (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). Moreover, once teaching, they are rarely offered suitable learning opportunities (Bishop et al., 2021). In the absence of the requisite knowledge, skills and personal dispositions, teachers are at risk of reinforcing colonial narratives about First Nations peoples that fail to challenge dominant stereotypes and deficit discourses (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, Hogarth, 2022, Nakata, 2015). Instead, they present 'corrupted understandings of Indigenous knowledge' (Nakata, 2015, p. 236) or teach in ways that 'simplifies, misrepresents, demonises, silences and erases Indigenous knowledges' (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, p. 97).

In a study of 12 primary schools in New South Wales, Harrison and Greenfield (2011, p. 70) concluded, 'Students are not learning Aboriginal views or perspectives, rather they are learning about their non-Aboriginal teacher's perspective on Aboriginal Australia'. Likewise, Moodie and Patrick (2017) interviewed 12 non-Indigenous teachers about the APSTs using the interpretative framework of 'settler grammars' to argue that 'settler grammars function to simultaneously erase Indigenous claims to sovereignty and epistemological equality, whilst promoting a representation of Indigenous people that asserts the primacy of the settler colonial state' (p. 1). In a similar vein, Harvey and Russell-Mundine (2019) evoke 'deep colonising' to describe situations where Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are espoused but misaligned with practice and therefore perpetuate racism and inequality rather than eradicate it. Additionally, Vass (2017) documents how pre-service teachers who wished to implement culturally responsive teaching practices were met with institutional barriers when they attempted to do so. Together, this analysis suggests that while policy directives in this area are welcomed, caution and criticality must be exercised, and considerable care given to the task (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding these crucial considerations, there are many reported examples of positive and even transformative, learning experiences either at university (e.g. Burgess & Cavanagh, 2016, Hollinsworth, 2016, Macdonald et al., 2023, Phillips, 2019) or with the

teaching workforce in schools (e.g. Bishop et al., 2021). One example of transformative learning in a university context is the Nowanup ‘bush university’ that uses an experiential ‘On Country’ learning model (Eades & Forrest, 2023). But in some cases, these positive learning experiences might depend on a particular educator/s, community, or a research project and consequently, may be short-lived. Moreover, positive learning experiences do not necessarily directly translate into improved teaching practices.

For enduring change, skills in critical reflection and reflexivity are crucial for non-Indigenous peoples, and specifically teachers, to critique their own positioning and relationality within contemporary colonial systems (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, Ghys & Gray, 2020, Lowe et al., 2021, Phillips, 2019, Weuffen et al., 2023b). A shift in focus is required from ‘knowing’ First Nations peoples to ‘knowing’ oneself (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). Hollinsworth (2016, p. 424) suggests that non-Indigenous peoples should focus on racisms and white privilege to avoid culturalist accounts and the othering of First Nations peoples. Phillips (2019) suggests the use of Indigenist Standpoint Pedagogy to navigate this complex space through critical self-enquiry and theoretical analysis to enact reflexivity. Grogan et al. (2023) describe how students’ prior experiences impact their ability to engage with this type of learning.

### **The cultural interface**

The cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b) represents more than the intersection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges, ‘to capture this complexity it is helpful to conceptualise this space, not as an intersection, but as a much broader interface’ (Nakata, 2007a, p. 198). It is a ‘multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation’ (Nakata, 2007a, p. 199). Through this process new ways of understanding are produced (Nakata, 2007a, p. 201).

Nakata propositions the contemporary space of Indigenous Australians and their educational agendas as positioned within a terrain of competing knowledge traditions about what works for Indigenous students. This is an opposing standpoint to structuralist theorists who hold a unilineal view of the contemporary space as engineered by a dominant nation state. The convergence of Indigenous and Western knowledge trajectories, Nakata argues, is much more complex than they imagine, and cannot be reduced simply to points of ‘difference’ where, for example, non-alignments in formal learning engagements are reduced to explanations of ‘a lack of sameness’ (Nakata, 2007b, p. 8). Teachers, students and communities may navigate this problematic space without necessarily understanding how such tacit contestations manifest as pre-conditions to not just inform but limit what is possible by them. It is therefore ‘critical for non-Indigenous supporters develop deeper understanding of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned at different knowledge systems’ (Nakata, 2007b, p. 12).

### **Our study**

The first author is a non-Indigenous lecturer in the field of teacher education. She has taught in remote and regional First Nations educational contexts across Australia, and

actively researches in this space. The second author is an Aboriginal academic with over 43 years' experience working in First Nations educational settings. The third author is a non-Indigenous student support officer for First Nations students in higher education settings. All three authors collaboratively designed the research project; however, the third author conducted the interviews to meet ethical requirements.

Our study originated from the first author's experience teaching a professional experience unit to a group of 18 students in our institution's Master of Teaching postgraduate degree. The unit is the first in a suite of three professional experience units where students undertake their professional experience placement (or teaching practicum). Thus, students did not have any practical experience of the classroom and the unit focussed on developing the skills and knowledge for students to plan lessons for their upcoming two-week placement. It is also important to note that students were in the first six months of their two-year degree, which does not include a specific unit about First Nations peoples, their knowledges, languages, histories, and cultures in education. Instead, the course is designed for this knowledge to be embedded within the degree and learned throughout. For example, in this professional experience unit, the lecturer included a weekly Acknowledgment of Country that explored a different topic each week and there were additional readings related to First Nations learners for most of the topics.

The first assessment task in this unit required students to create a sequence of four lesson plans. Of the 18 students in the unit, six submitted a sequence of lesson plans with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content embedded into the key learning areas explored in the lessons without being asked to (and without being assessed on their ability to do so). This surprisingly high proportion of students – one in three – stood in stark contrast to the literature and prompted the question, why? Two research questions were posed:

- (1) What are the factors that influence non-Indigenous ITE students' willingness to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lesson plans?
- (2) How do non-Indigenous ITE students navigate the cultural interface when planning to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content?

Because this research engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, a high-risk ethics application was submitted and approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: HRE2022-0086). Approximately one year after undertaking the professional experience unit, the six students who included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lesson plans were invited to participate in our study. This enabled students to reflect on both their initial experiences in this unit, as well as those that proceeded throughout their 2-year degree as they neared its completion at the time of the interviews. Five students agreed and returned consent forms; however, one interview did not eventuate due to scheduling constraints. Each participant was offered \$50 gift card as token of appreciation for their time.

In line with the theoretical lenses of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007a, 2007b) and settler ignorance and resistance, a qualitative research design was used to gain insight into the students' lives, and their socio-cultural worlds through semi-structured interviews with a focus on stories. We adopted aspects of 'yarning'

methodology for our semi-structured interviews. Yarning is a well-established research method designed to understand and privilege the lived experiences of participants (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010, Shay, 2021, Sinclair, 2021). Yarns allow the researcher/s and participant/s to journey together through stories and topics which are relevant to the research as 'to have a yarn is not a one-way process but a dialogical process that is reciprocal and mutual' (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38). Yarning helps to develop an 'understanding of participants' perspectives and viewpoints via stories and recollections and support the journey of making meaning' (Sinclair, 2021, p. 204). This approach aligns with Nakata's (2007a, 2007b) proposition that suggests the need for a fine-grained analysis of the empirical data on how participants engage and perform their everyday, as important points of entry to investigate data on their underlying constitutive characteristics. From this perspective, it is therefore, important to fully comprehend 'what is going on' in the data by eliciting rich and meaningful responses, e.g. what are the foundations of their responses? What is the catalyst that help form the position taken by each participant?

To incorporate a 'yarning' approach in the interview process, the interviewer introduced herself and shared her life stories with participants before beginning. This enabled her to position herself in relation to the research, and enact dialogical processes built on reciprocity. This conversational approach contributed to a relaxed and interactive environment that participants reported enjoying (e.g. 'It was really nice to hear your story'). At the conclusion of the interviews, participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and make sense of their stories through dialogue.

While incorporating elements of 'yarning' into the interviews, we still describe our method as a semi-structured interview because the questions were developed prior to the interview, as required by the ethics committee (despite stating we were planning to use yarning methodology). In the end, this approach was preferred by our non-Indigenous participants who appreciated viewing the questions prior to the interview to think about their responses. The interview questions covered demographic information as well as life experiences before asking specifically about their choices for their lesson plans, how they navigated the process of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, and areas for improvement. Interviews lasted approximately 70–90 minutes and were conducted online through the Microsoft Teams platform. They were automatically transcribed through the embedded software and participants were sent their transcript to confirm its accuracy or to edit accordingly (Shenton, 2004).

Our process of analysis involved writing a personal story for each participant, reflecting our alignment with yarning methodology. Each story was a mix of retell, quotes and analysis. In this paper, we present the summarised version of these stories to explore the reasons why the ITE students in our study chose to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lessons. Next, we analysed how students navigated the cultural interface throughout this process. Initially, student responses were coded into six themes: tools to navigate the cultural interface; emotions at the cultural interface; cultural interface as a journey, but always 'unknowing'; ethics at the cultural interface; complexity at the cultural interface; next steps – deepening knowledge at the cultural interface.



However, due to the interrelated nature of these themes, through further reflection, they were reduced to three: ethics and emotions at the cultural interface; the cultural interface as a site of learning; and tools to navigate the cultural interface.

## Students' stories

The ITE students who participated in our study are given the pseudonyms – Tahnee, Marissa, Jenny and Axxel to share their stories.

### Tahnee

Tahnee's decision to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in her lesson plans was a 'choice' she made prior to beginning her studies ('For me, meaningfully including First Nations voices in the classroom is an obvious must. So, I guess I made the "choice" before I even started uni'). Tahnee shares a range of experiences that have shaped her perspectives and outlook on life, they extend from primary school through to university and the workplace. We identify two dominant and repeated themes in the stories she tells: her repeated encounters with entrenched and systemic 'white male privilege' in Australia, and her feelings of being without a voice in these situations.

Growing up in a rural township, Tahnee describes her schooling experience as being very 'white' without a diverse student population. She ties this to her desire to counter the dominant colonial narratives she was taught in history at school i.e. 'Captain Cook'. After completing schooling, she moves to Perth to begin her university studies where, with a minor in politics, she 'was kind of faced with the same lack of diversity'. Her experiences fuel her desire to enact change, 'rooms of upper-class white boys who thought they knew everything. I think all of those experiences, just made me, even in slight little ways, one on top of another just made me want to, do something about this'. The workplace was no different ('there's these middle-aged white men telling everyone how things should be'). Tahnee relocates several times for work across Perth and the Southwest of W.A. However, her experiences are always the same. Tahnee's language choices (e.g. 'but again' and 'I just kept coming up against') which are repeated multiple times highlight the repetitious nature of these experiences to give the impression she is always butting up against 'the system'. Often, she refers to 'this', 'these' or 'the same sort of things' and her use of allusion perhaps reflects a broader trend in Australian society to avoid labelling racism, or other forms of discrimination (Hollinsworth, 2016). But at other times, she is more explicit about what she means, 'we're still run by white men basically, in every industry'. Tahnee's repeated use of the term 'white' (referenced 11 times in the transcript) indicates she sees and acknowledges how 'race' as well as 'gender' operate in society to confer 'voice' to some and not others as she describes her repeated experiences of feeling voiceless.

Tahnee's encounters with white male privilege were not the only drivers for her decision, she also highlights her personal positioning as a 'minority' in Australian society as a contributing factor. Over the course of the interview, Tahnee shares how her actions were 'inspired' by her own experiences as a LGBTQIA+ minority ('we are more empathetic of other minorities. Generally, not all'), and as disempowered female, despite identifying as 'white' herself. In her personal positioning, she recognises multiple axes

of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) and is committed to using her ‘privilege to help’. Tahnee’s decision to become a teacher, and to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in her lessons is presented as a form of social activism.

Given Tahnee’s deeply personal reasons, it was surprising to note that when asked about other pre-service teachers including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lessons her tone shifted to evoke curriculum requirements and policy mandates as the primary driver for this decision (‘it’s in the curriculum. So, they literally have to’), despite it having not featured at all in her own justifications. Perhaps, she is making the point that it shouldn’t even be a question. This is confirmed when she states, ‘Umm, I don’t really see any other option’.

### **Marissa**

Marissa is driven by her desire to ‘make an impact’ in society. Originally from a Central Asian country, Marissa has journeyed across the world, before ‘being able to do what I wanted to do’. Being fluent in three languages (Russian, German and English) and with a degree in translation, she travelled the world working as a translator at international conferences and as a flight attendant.

Marissa begins by recounting her work experiences which follow a repeated pattern of explanation. First, she explains what was enjoyable and challenging about the job, and then she returns to her unrealised desire to ‘make an impact’. Her need to ‘make an impact’ is referenced seven times throughout the transcript. Describing herself as ‘really altruistic’, Marissa enrolls in a political science degree. But coming from a ‘poor family’ meant working ‘all the time’ and she was unable to continue. Marissa then meets her future Australian husband in a South Asian country with whom she shares her ambitions, and the decision is made to move to Australia to undertake a teaching degree.

As the interview progresses, Marissa reveals the deeply personal reason she feels so compelled to make a difference in the lives of others. She describes being from a ‘poor family’ with divorced parents and two stepfathers who were abusive (‘a lot of beating’, ‘[country name] - it’s just notorious for its mistreatment of women’). Without family members with further education, her familial expectations were to ‘get married and have kids’. But this was not the life she wanted for herself. Instead, she says, ‘I want to bring about change, in the society, of how they think and how they see themselves and what they’re capable of, because in my family nobody really said oh, you can do these things’. Marissa positions herself as an agent of change, and her teaching, a form of social activism.

Marissa’s decision to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in her lesson plans is positioned within this overall desire to ‘have an impact’ through her teaching. Despite having ‘no idea anything about Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander culture[s] of Australia’, she embarked on this journey. Marissa recognised ‘a push for incorporating the Aboriginal content and ways of teaching’. This strongly resonated with her, professing her ‘subjective opinion’ that it is ‘actually more important’. When asked about this decision, Marissa justifies it with an acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the sovereign custodians of Australia (e.g. ‘on their land’). Therefore, she concludes, the First peoples and their knowledges should hold a primary position in education. From further conversation, it becomes clear that the

parallels she draws between the British invasion of Australia and her former experiences of Russian colonisation have informed this position.

Marissa finishes by listing two other reasons for her decision to add Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in her lessons: making learning meaningful for First Nations students and being motivated by the learning environment at university. The interview concludes with Marissa sharing her intentions to go ‘beyond’ teaching to ‘take it to the next level’ in terms of what she can contribute to society, which she describes as ‘what’s motivating me this whole time’.

### **Jenny**

Jenny’s early life is characterised by transience. Born in rural W.A., she provides some illustrative examples of this locational transiency. Her and her two sisters were all born in different locations across W.A. She spent many years being home-schooled because Department of Education policy required her to unenroll from distance education after a certain period and enrol in the local school. Often this meant attending the local school for only a week or so. Consequently, prior to being home-schooled Jenny ‘went to a lot of different primary schools’.

Jenny recalls three formative experiences during this time that have shaped her perspectives and outlook. She describes two experiences of being a minority ‘white’ kid in a predominantly Aboriginal classroom, and the humiliation she experienced not being able to correctly pronounce the names of her fellow classmates because the sound structures of Aboriginal languages were unfamiliar to her. In these stories, Jenny positions herself as one of the ‘white kids’, not shying away from this terminology as many Australians do (Hollinsworth, 2016). Her awareness of her own positioning as a settler is also evident in her personal introduction when she explains ‘my ancestors settled . . .’. Despite the ‘humiliation’ Jenny experienced, she reflects on and acknowledges the value of knowing what it feels like to be a ‘minority culture’.

The third experience she chooses to share is a very early experience of witnessing systemic racism. She does not label it as such, nor does she unpack the incident further, she simply recounts the incident, leaving the story to make its own mark. It appears that, at a very young age, this incident prompted Jenny to realise that people could be treated differently based on the colour of their skin. This could have influenced her thinking, but she does not explicitly say this. Her choice to share this incident, however, signals its importance.

Jenny’s career changed directions several times after initially training as a nurse, with her locational transience being ever-present throughout her story. She then decides she would like a ‘new challenge’ and being from a family of teachers, teaching seemed like a logical choice and one she would be well-supported in.

When asked why she made the choice to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in her lesson plans, Jenny stresses the importance of learning ‘about the First Nations [peoples] and the history of Australia’ as well as the responsibility of teachers ‘to actually incorporate this stuff into our lesson plans’. She extends this point to make it clear that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be positioned as the ‘first’ peoples of Australia (‘they should be, you know, first and foremost’), recognising the sovereign status of First Nations peoples in Australia. In

her reference to ‘our responsibility’ Jenny expresses the belief that there is a greater moral imperative for teachers to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lesson which is tied to the status of First Nations peoples as the ‘first’ peoples of Australia.

At a pragmatic level, Jenny describes the lecturer as being ‘influential’ in her decision-making along with the desire to try new things as a pre-service teacher. Lastly, she refers to the curriculum requirement, ‘And then finally, I think because it’s a cross-curriculum priority in the curriculum’. But it is clear, that for Jenny, this bears the least weight on her decision.

### **Axxel**

Axxel describes feeling ‘a bit lost’ after he completes high school and there are many twists and turns in his journey to enrolling in a teaching degree. After taking some time ‘just to breathe’, Axxel starts with a certificate in residential drafting but felt ‘the repetition come’ and ‘didn’t necessarily love the idea of it’. Instead, he worked casually at the local supermarket whilst completing a Bachelor of Art (fast-tracked in 2 years). Axxel ‘worked a little bit in the industry’ but mostly engaged in ‘freelance work’ where he ‘missed collaborating’. He expanded his horizons beyond his immediate qualifications and ‘started a developer portfolio’ but ‘just thought, you know, there’s something missing’ prompting him to ‘look into further study once more’. With teachers in the family, he says, ‘I just decided to kind of step towards that direction and here I am’.

Coming into the unit, Axxel confesses, ‘Honestly, I really didn’t have a whole lot of experience [with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples]. I didn’t know’. But shares what he did know, ‘I knew that there was a divide in society and that I knew that there was discrimination against [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples]. At least that was very, very prominent when I was younger’. Despite emphasising how prominent discrimination was when he was younger with the words ‘very, very’, Axxel does not elaborate further to describe any specific instances. The conversation turns to the ways the world is changing and his desire to be part of that change (‘help make a difference in some way’). He indicates his hope for the future and positions himself as an agent of change but does not share any specific stories or aspects of his background that may have influenced his position.

Axxel relates his decision to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in his lesson plans to his personal beliefs or philosophy. He espouses ideals of ‘fairness’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘acceptance’ with a focus on developing the ‘intercultural’ capabilities of students. The lesson he designed reflects these ideals. For his lessons, Axxel had a distinct purpose; he wanted students to experience a different point of view or perspective. In the interview, Axxel frequently uses the words ‘perspective’ (7 times), ‘different’ (13 times), and ‘point of view’ (5 times). Axxel discusses what he hopes to achieve as a teacher. He would like Australia to ‘be as fair as it can be’ and would like his students ‘to develop their critical thought process’ and learn ‘soft skills like respect’. Axxel is particularly strong in his point that ‘children should not be scared’ of discussing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, a point he extends to adults. The notion that both children and adults may be ‘scared’ of such conversations, reflects how discussions about race and ethnicity tend to be silenced in Australian society (Hollinsworth, 2016). To overcome this, he plans

to be ‘as truthful as I can be’, to ‘remove as much bias as I can’, and to let students ‘make their own mind up’ because he doesn’t believe an ‘opinion should be a right or a wrong’.

When the question about pre-service teachers including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lesson plan was posed, Axxel, echoed the mantra – ‘it is in the curriculum . . . teachers have to teach it’.

None of the ITE students in our study included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content because they had to. Policy was not the driving force for these ITE students. Instead, all signalled they felt the moral imperative to do so. Tahnee, Marissa and Axxel position themselves as agents of change in society. For Tahnee and Marissa, the reasons are personal, but Axxel’s drive to ‘make a difference’ is less clear. Jenny does not actively position herself as an agent of change but describes her deep sense of responsibility; a responsibility to do the right thing for the First peoples of Australia. Ironically, however, when asked about whether pre-service teachers should include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their teaching, all students returned to curriculum requirements and mandates despite this not being their primary reason for doing so. The common response appears to be: It’s not a choice – you must. It seems that ‘curriculum requirements and policy mandates’ form the dominant discourse used to justify the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, without representing the reality of the reasons why pre-service teachers do. Thus, this policy mantra is unlikely to be helpful for overcoming settler ignorance and resistance, nor does it prepare ITE students to skilfully navigate their positionality at cultural interface.

It was noted that all participants had significant life experience. Whilst all students enrolled in a master’s degree have a prior degree, our participants had completed or started multiple qualifications in addition to their undergraduate degree and had diverse work experiences as well. Each expressed dissatisfaction with their previous careers for a range of reasons. Three had also moved and lived in several locations. They had experienced being a minority and had developed empathy for those in similar situations. These commonalities appear to tie our participants together. It is unclear if it is through these experiences that they have developed their sense of social justice, or whether it was something about them that led them to seek out these diverse experiences. But it raises the question of whether greater life experience, or experiential learning whilst at university, could be beneficial for addressing settler ignorance and resistance.

### **Navigating the cultural interface**

In the face of widespread ‘epistemic inertia’ (Weuffen et al., 2023a, p. 139) when it comes to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, the students in this study were drivers of change who actively decided to navigate the complex space that is, the cultural interface. The cultural interface represents a highly contested space where personal positioning is crucial. Nakata (2007b) contends that ‘we cannot just “do” Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum’ (p. 8). He argues, there is no way to avoid this knowledge being constructed as anything else but ‘about us’ which ‘threatens its integrity and exploits it on an even greater scale’ (Nakata, 2007b, p. 8). Participants acknowledged this in their deep concern for the ethics of engaging with the cultural interface. Driven by a moral imperative as described in their stories, there were two main ways students navigated the ethical entanglement between their desire to include Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander content and the issues related to representation (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, Nakata, 2007b). One was by positioning themselves as learners and the other was by committing to research that privileged First Nations voices. Ultimately, however, students felt the limitations of these approaches, and expressed the need to learn from First Nations peoples.

Although the students in our study did not report being fearful or scared as is often the case (Anderson et al., 2020, Bishop et al., 2021, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012, O'Dowd, 2010, Shipp, 2013), they were highly concerned about the 'ethics' of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. Ethical considerations included: the cultural protocols (for example, the 'protocols around inviting an Indigenous representative into the school'), correct terminology, avoiding using false information/using accurate information, and avoiding anything which may be offensive. They described being 'cautious', not wanting to be disrespectful, offensive, unethical, or do 'the wrong thing'. These ethical concerns and emotions point to students' tacit understandings of how teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content positions them as 'knowers', and the dangers inherent with this position (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, Moreton-Robinson, 2004, Nakata, 2007b). While literature sometimes posits these emotions as excuses (e.g. Hogarth, 2022, Weuffen et al., 2023a), they can also be viewed as an acknowledgment of students' positionality (as non-Indigenous peoples) in relation to the content they are teaching; a crucial element of the teacher reflexivity required to dismantle colonial narratives in the classroom (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, Ghys & Gray, 2020, Lowe et al., 2021, Phillips, 2019, Weuffen et al., 2023b). At times, students questioned their decisions, or felt overcome by emotions. But they were able to push these to the side, often returning to the greater moral imperative to do so ('but then I just have to pull my shit together and use my privilege to help. Because I must'). Thus, the ITE students were able to mitigate the discomfort they felt including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content by positioning themselves as learners and by 'doing their research'.

All participants positioned themselves as learners. Moreover, Jenny was able to acknowledge her outsider positionality and her inability to 'know' ('I think it's very different from the outside ... I don't think you really can really know'). Others also clearly identified the limitations of their knowledge – and the fact they were always learning ('as much as my scope of knowledge is at the moment'). The way that students situated themselves as 'learners' (opposed to 'knowers') appeared to operate as a strength, or a form of protection, which allowed them to make mistakes, forgive themselves and learn from them, and consequently, continue to navigate the cultural interface. Jenny explains, 'But I do also still believe that if you have the best of intentions and are willing to learn then even when you get it wrong, you can learn from this and so can the class if the teacher is transparent'.

Another way that students were able to ethically navigate their personal positioning in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content was through being 'dedicated researchers'. All described the importance of research for planning to teach First Nations content with, at times, little knowledge. Marissa explains, 'Because there's just so many ways you can make it go wrong. And that was a big challenge for me, and the only way I overcame it was through research, I was doing so much'. In this research, participants privileged First Nations voices. Jenny emailed many local Aboriginal

organisations, whilst others focused on identifying resources that were ‘actually’ created or written by First Nations peoples. However, their learning was largely theoretical and there was a strong sense of wanting to have their knowledge confirmed by First Nations peoples. Marissa says, ‘I would like to . . . know more because it’s hard to see when you access resources on the Internet and whether the stuff you’re reading about . . . Does it *actually* reflect what they think?’ The word ‘actually’ is used throughout by the students to make clear that without the involvement of First Nations peoples, there is a lack of ‘legitimacy’ or ‘appropriateness’ in their current approaches. A shortcoming of their university education.

All students identified the university learning environment as a key driver of their learning that equipped them with some skills and knowledge to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. Tahnee stated the course design with First Nations content embedded throughout (instead of a stand-alone unit) was helpful and built her confidence in this area. But to deepen their learning at the cultural interface, Tahnee, Marissa and Jenny desperately wanted to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. All pointed out that they had not had an opportunity to do so in their degree. Jenny explains, ‘And today I haven’t had any Aboriginal [person] teaching in the Master of Teaching, those six units and not even a lecture, so it’s only ever been like that advocating, just talking about what I do. I’ve never *actually* had any direct information from an Aboriginal person’.

In a similar vein, students also pointed to the need for experiential learning and opportunities to receive meaningful feedback on their progress at including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their lessons. Additionally, Jenny argued for using university assessments to drive student accountability in this area (see also Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

Policy alone is unlikely to produce culturally competent graduates, especially teaching graduates who are required to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their teaching. Policy alone will not undo settler ignorance and resistance and as argued by others, may perpetuate it (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022, Harrison & Greenfield, 2011, Hogarth, 2022, Nakata, 2015).

Instead, in our study, it was those ITE students who felt a moral imperative to do so that chose to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in their teaching, reflecting the broader literature that suggests that it is students’ prior experiences (Grogan et al., 2023) and their ability to critically and reflexively engage in their learning that makes a difference (Hollinsworth, 2016, Moreton-Robinson, 2004, Phillips, 2019). However, it was clear that the weight of responsibility rested largely with the individual, both the lecturers and the students, without commensurate levels of institutional accountability for producing culturally competent graduates (see also Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019, Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022).

Our ITE students felt that their learning was stymied by their lack of engagement with First Nations peoples leading them to question the authenticity of the information they received or its legitimacy. This represents a point of entry at the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007b) and the politics of representation (Moreton-

Robinson, 2004) that can be conceived of in many ways. The politics of representation can be subverted form of settler resistance, as seen in the example of students questioning their lecturers' Indigeneity (Macdonald et al., 2023). In this way, settlers' resist knowledge that is not delivered by a stereotypical (or 'traditional') First Nations person. This acts to erase the diversity of First Nations peoples across Australia and their contemporary existence, and in doing so, reinforces settler ignorance (Hollinsworth, 2016, Rice et al., 2022). At the same time, there is a genuine concern about, and need for, the involvement of First Nations peoples in the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content to avoid essentialist and false representations (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, Nakata, 2007b). Understanding this complex terrain that does not exist in simplistic binary positions lies at the heart of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007b).

It is clear, however, that further work is required to improve teacher education practices in this field. The ITE students' critique is not unwarranted. Using Fraser's model (Fraser, 2001), current university approaches to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content reflect attempts at 'cultural recognition' without sufficient redistribution of resources and improved representation. This highlights that settler resistance and ignorance is not only seen in individual acts but also in the ways that institutions are configured to privilege western knowledge systems over First Nations knowledges which are often reduced to 'tick box' exercises (Anderson et al., 2020, Bishop et al., 2021). The mechanisms of settler colonialism in university systems are seen not only in the allocation of resources, but also in the complex apparatus of policies that inhibit greater representation of First Nations peoples and ways of learning. Rarely is there a budget to employ First Nations peoples in university courses, and non-western knowledge systems and credentials are not often recognised. Additionally, learning remains mostly confined to classroom environments and limitations on experiential learning are often imposed due the costs involved, restrictive risk management policies, as well as the need for equivalent online learning provisions for equity purposes. To overcome these barriers, Grogan et al. (2021) introduced a series of videos from First Nations peoples to create a diverse learning experience for non-Indigenous students. However, whilst responses like this are an improvement on many current practices, we contend that experiential First Nations led learning models such as the Nowanup 'bush university' (Eades & Forrest, 2023) are the transformative experiences that educational systems should aspire to.

## Note

1. In this paper we tend to use the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' with reference to curriculum content, 'First Nations' to refer to the first peoples of Australia (i.e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) and 'Indigenous' as a categorical term e.g. 'non-Indigenous'. We do so respectfully recognising that not all terms are equally accepted by all people. We have at times used these terms interchangeably to promote the readability of this paper, and at other times, our language choice reflects the source information. We often pluralise these terms to acknowledge the diversity that exists within these groupings.



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