

**Revamping the agenda for schools, curriculum, teacher preparation programs and assessments:  
realigning with sociocultural tenets for Aboriginal learners**

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If you consider the state of the life pathways for Australian Aboriginal youth, various indicators give rise to being alarmed that their lives may be in jeopardy. Compared with mainstream Australian youth, you will encounter the following:

- A lower proportion perform well on the assessments that are enlisted to judge their progress.
- Many Aboriginal youth drop out from secondary schools and few gain admission to or graduate from tertiary institutions <sup>i</sup>
- A disproportionate number of Aboriginal youth experience incarceration.<sup>ii</sup>
- Suicide rates for Aboriginal youth are approximately 3 times higher than mainstream youth <sup>iii</sup>

Oftentimes responsibility for these difficulties is ascribed to the Aboriginal youth themselves and their communities. However, if you turn the lens around and examine the possible systemic antecedents it is difficult to avoid questioning whether there is a mismatch between the systems in place and the needs of Aboriginal learners. While there may be other factors that may be contributing, the systems themselves may be factors that create some of the problems. <sup>iv</sup> The systems in place tend to perpetuate forms of cultural displacement and do so on a number of fronts-social, cultural and economic. Certainly, there are elements in the educational system that make significant contributions. Indeed, key contributors to cultural alienation are educational practices that are not aligned with nor adequately support Aboriginal learners.

- Aboriginal students from remote and rural areas are likely to experience approaches to education that are standardized and not aligned with their backgrounds of experience and ways of knowing.

- Access to future pathways for Aboriginal students from rural and remote areas is limited by the measures (e.g., HSC) that are employed to assess their qualifications and potential. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/19/stress-is-taking-a-disturbing-toll-on-year-12-should-we-do-away-with-exams>
- There is a shortage of Aboriginal teachers. Plus, teacher preparation programs may be in need of significant change. Aboriginal teachers report marginalization by the institutions (tertiary institutions, school placements) where they are prepared.
- The use of NAPLAN for judging of school success ties performance to measures that tout been “culture free” thereby discounting the diversity of many Aboriginal students’ experiences and capabilities.
- The notion of “levelling the playing field” fails to address the range of diverse needs of Aboriginal students. Such notions undergird forms of standardization rather than differentiation of curriculum and teaching practices needed to meet the full range of learners in schools.
- The imposition of regimens touted as “best practices” or designated as “evidenced-based” may not meet the needs of Aboriginal students.<sup>v</sup>
- Educational initiatives such as those tied to Artificial Intelligence (AI) may involve algorithms that detract from rather than support Aboriginal ways of knowing and needs. Educational applications derived from AI are not the sole answer for meeting students’ needs.
- Currently, despite some additional funds for Aboriginal initiatives, the funding of schools is skewed in favour of Independent Schools that receive a mix of government and other funding that amounts to three-fold or more of the funding per student of those enrolled in public schools.
- A “one size fits all education” advantages those groups aligned to what remains a curriculum better befitting students with Anglophone backgrounds than Aboriginal learners.

Indeed, our examination of the New South Wales Department of Education Strategic plan (New South Wales Department of Education, 2024) questions whether some of the elements may perpetuate the gap between mainstream students and Aboriginal students especially those from remote areas. Despite espousing respect for diversity and that every Aboriginal learner will have

access to high-quality public education, there remains a focus on uniformity masked as fairness and top-down mandates rather than educational improvements that are customized. If we applied a postcolonial lens to the curriculum and testing regimens being imposed, we would suggest that the nature and form of such a singular approach reflects a colonizing or an assimilation stance.

We recommend making a foundational shift to an alignment with socio-cultural tenets, a greater respect for transforming educational practices in accordance with respecting the need for approaches anchored in a commitment to diversity. Accordingly, we suggest the following imperatives:

- Shifting from top-down reform models to situated organic forms of curriculum development.
- Embracing diversity, relevance and culturally responsive pedagogy for Aboriginal learners.
- Moving from an orientation of teachers as technician to teachers as culturally responsive educators.
- Shifting teacher and educational leader development to a case-based approach to ensure that educators develop the design and applied skills to meet the needs of the diverse learners whom they seek to support.
- Investing in recruiting Aboriginal teachers.
- Integrating digital tools and AI as complements to responsive teaching and participatory student learning across diverse circumstances.
- Developing better measures of Aboriginal learning outcomes including assessments and practices that support students learning to learn.

We posit that many of the government's strategic plans and some current policies involve an orientation that fails to address Aboriginal capabilities stemming from their diverse and situated circumstances. We are concerned that the state-wide curriculum and the recent strategic plans are not fashioned to build upon the local understandings and ways of knowing of different learners. Many of the current legislated mandates are tied to prescribing curricula without regard to the adaptations, innovations and customization that teachers need to pursue. Approaching teaching and learning via the uniform application of practices detracts from what we would suggest

should be a situated, local approach that proceeds organically building upon socio-cultural considerations. The emphasis upon standardization or “one size fits all” curriculum and tests reflect a tendency to view cultures monolithically rather than diversely.

### **The need to shift from top-down monolithic reform models to situated organic forms of curriculum development**

A large number of efforts to reform education fall prey to claims or hopes of a panacea or what has been termed by some as “a silver bullet” or “one size fits all” reform package. However, as noted in major reviews of educational research and past reform efforts, such efforts are ill-conceived and educators should be far more sanguine about the generalizability of research from one site to another or across populations, As Kadriye Ercikan and Wolf-Michael Roth indicated from their review of research studies and syntheses in education, one should not extrapolate from research practices that disregard the vital role of teachers or a form of “teacher proofing” educational initiatives. As they concluded.

The teacher, to design appropriate instruction for individual students, is interested precisely in the variation from the trend, that is, she is interested in the variation that in statistical approaches constitutes error variance...with forms of knowledge that are sufficiently specific to allow her to design instruction to the specific needs expressed in the variation from the trend. (Ercikan & Roth, 2009, p. 5).

Such refrained sentiments reflect an orientation to educational endeavors that recognizes the need to move beyond mandating the same practices for all students, to recognizing the situatedness of any endeavor and teachers with the design skills and license to adopt and adapt their practices to meet the needs of different learners.

Therefore, while diversity may be voiced as a concern by policy makers, often differences are sidelined, marginalized and positioned as gaps or deficits to bridge. This can occur in countless ways. For example, students from minority communities are often assigned learning material and forms of assessment disconnected from their experiences. Rather than approaches that build upon the cultural repertoire of experiences and ways of knowing that are seeded in communities, oftentimes Aboriginal learners encounter approaches that are more monolithic than pluralistic

where learning does not occur in spaces that provide Aboriginal learners cultural affirmations or multivocal engagements. Such a critique is apparent in the review by Luke and his colleagues (Luke et al., 2013) of the Aboriginal initiative “Stronger Smarter Schools” (see Sarra, 2013) as well as the critiques of Direct Instruction and MultiLit. As Luke and others have noted missing was an appreciation of the need to build from the local rather than assume the merits of imposing the same initiative across school sites. (Luke et al., 2013; Luke 2014),

Oftentimes educational policy makers tout accountability without scrutinizing the validity of the assessment evidence that they employ. For example, they employ national testing programs such as NAPLAN and international assessment such as PISA without examining the merits of such measures as a basis for assessing Aboriginal learners. The rather blatant disregard for the validity of measures touted as “cultural free” assessments is under examined. The ripple effects of such portrayals especially via the media and government releases are not helpful. For example, reports by the media and government agencies of Aboriginal education are portrayed and positioned as deficient or in need of bridging a gap. In doing so, they portray Aboriginals as needing to bridge to what mainstreams tout as essential--befitting forms of subjugation of others. They neglect approaches to assess the true capabilities of diverse learners.

As Canadian First Nations educator Marie Battiste has argued, if Aboriginal learning is to be supported, it requires a consideration of Aboriginal ways of knowing that builds upon rather than displaces such. It requires recognition and support for practices that may only exist historically or apart from state approved and mandated practices. Historically, local initiatives to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners has been victim to colonizing forces, a denial of Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination as well as a combination of ignorance and dismissal of Aboriginal practices. <sup>vi</sup>

As Larissa Behrendt has noted. First Nations spaces for Aboriginal learners require:

...a philosophical commitment. It means ensuring that Indigenous voices are not at the margins but at the centre of the conversation. It means recognizing that our knowledge traditions stand alongside Western traditions, not beneath them. It means asking: whose

stories are being told, whose knowledge is being valued, and whose future is being imagined? (September 22, 2025)

### **Embracing diversity, relevance and culturally responsive pedagogy for Aboriginal learners**

Despite several Australian Aboriginal educators recommending Aboriginal tenets for educational initiatives, such has been more the exception than rule (e.g., Rigney, 2013; Fogarty et al., 2012; Hogarth and Langford, 2024). The end result is that Australian schools are focussed upon state or federally mandated uniform standards, to replicate what is touted as best practices and to measure the merits of their programs by standardized and culturally distilled forms of assessment. If you were interested in teachers and students engaged in site-based teaching and inquiry you may have been dismayed by the overgeneralized orientation toward pre-set practices as you were expected to assume the role of technician rather than reflective practitioner. If you were a beginning teacher you might find yourself struggling to survive a system in which you were isolated, alone, and overwhelmed. If you were a curriculum developer, you may or may not find yourself directed away from a rich view of project-based approaches stemming from local considerations to approaches that teach to what is testable and directed to develop curricula or teaching activities tied to a narrow band of skills rather than an expanded view of learning possibilities. Despite some of the labels used for some of the current endorsed curriculum products (e.g., MultiLit, Direct Instruction) such approaches have a tendency to claim more than they deliver. The gold standard for research on teaching and learning involves examining long term, sustainable and transferable or generative effects. <sup>vii</sup>A key question to ask is whether an educational approach represents a preoccupation with subskills and top-down imposition of practices overriding local considerations and disregards socio-cultural elements that build upon the diversity of learners' backgrounds toward developing independent and critical learners. Again, despite recognition of the diversity that exists across and within Australian Aboriginal communities, there has been a reluctance to support Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is curious that there is considerable interest in such matters as evidenced by the discussions emanating from Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* (Pascoe, 2014) and its critics (Sutton & Walshe (2021)).

If Australian educational policy makers are to be responsive to the needs of Aboriginal learners, they might consider what has taken place in Canada and New Zealand. In Canada, major reforms of First Nations education are underway in an effort to re-establish and build upon rather than displace Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. For example, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education have ratified an Accord on Indigenous Education (2010, 2025) directed at transforming K-12 education throughout Canada. Their principles to which they commit include:

- Recognizing and affirming Indigenous rights and self-determination
- Decolonization and Indigenous resurgence through in and through curricula
- Indigenous and anti-colonial pedagogies
- Indigenized approaches to assessment
- Indigenous language revitalization
- Indigenous education leadership

Similarly, in New Zealand, Māori ways of knowing (Kaupapa Māori) have become foundation to Māori educational thinking and the transformation of schooling. New Zealand educational policies simultaneously emphasize Māori language and identity as primary along with Māori ways of knowing (e.g., Smith, 2000 a & b). In more concrete terms, Māori educators established “Language Nests” to re-establish the Māori language, integrated Māori ways of knowing into the New Zealand curriculum and advanced Māori schools including tertiary institutions across New Zealand (e.g., Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi).

### **Moving from an orientation of teachers as technician to an era of teachers as culturally responsive educators**

We posit that there is a need to transform the preparation and ongoing development of Aboriginal teachers (and teachers of Aboriginal students) from viewing them as technicians to recognizing and supporting their role as culturally responsive educators.

As Lester-Irabinna Rigney and his colleagues have found in their analysis of Aboriginal educational alternatives, there is need for an approach where the following occurs:

Educators recognise the rich diversity of the child's identity; cultural and linguistic capabilities brought from home as strengths that promote learning success, pride, belonging and safety. Educators become learners and ethnographers of children's life-worlds to connect these to the curriculum for improved achievement. They recognise the need to value the cultural backgrounds of learners in education by redesigning pedagogies that have high impact. They investigate and co-construct learning opportunities for children to celebrate and develop their cultural and linguistic literate identities and to understand and respect those of others. Educators value relationships with families to develop a cultural diversity knowledge base of all children. Educators believe all knowledge and its definition of 'achievement' are socially constructed. They are aware that dominant western ontological knowledge traditions and its modern relationships to 'nature' are intertwined by the legacies of colonialism. Educators recognise different philosophies and traditions of interconnectedness to the nonhuman world and nature that shape ethical identities of children. Many Aboriginal people have a strong connection to land (country) as a living being and a teacher. This view has educational significance for spiritual, cultural and economic wellbeing of Aboriginal learners. Educators understand the need to address the needs of the Aboriginal child as individual and as group collective identity. Educators recognise the child's citizenry rights to education from birth and view the nature and purpose of knowledge is for both integration, cultural and linguistic maintenance, and not assimilation. (Rigney et al. 2020, p.30)

The teachers within a school should be engaged with the communities of their students. In the case of Aboriginal students, they should engage with those communities and respect the students they teach by enlisting that knowledge (e.g., social, cultural, linguistic, historic) in the crafting of their practices. For example, Martin Nakata has detailed, Indigenous knowledge and how it is different in the following ways:

- the range and role of different sources of knowledge—experience, observation, history, language, stories, dreams, nature, and animals.
- the nature of the state of knowledge—its animations, permanency, or changeability.
- its state of flux; and its relationship to the past, present, and future.
- the position of knowing within the community collective; and



- the basis for how knowledge and knowing are validated and used.

Along with other Indigenous scholars Nakata holds the view of Aboriginal ways of knowledge are less fixed, befitting an orientation to the world that is ecological, involving an intimacy between people and the natural worlds—past, present, and future.

Again, If the goal is to recognize, respect, build upon and bridge from the assets of Aboriginal students, teachers need to move from being visitors and interlopers within the schools to acquiring skills and ability to make discernments as cultural workers for the communities where they work. Teachers need to support students in ways that are affirmative and avoid positioning Aboriginal learners as outsiders or treating them as “unwelcome guests” (Morgan, 2019). If the preparation and development of teachers is to be more organic than prescribed, then preparation programs should address the need for Aboriginal teachers (and non-Aboriginal teachers of Aboriginal students) to be meaningfully engaged locally—to become aware of the ways of knowing, history and ongoing needs of communities. It might include engaging with Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, cultural leaders, and community members to gain invaluable insights and guidance en route to improving the systems to support and to help formulate educational practices that are relevant. In contrast to seeking fidelity with top-down mandates, we would suggest a shift to viewing schools as venues to support the voices and ways of knowing of diverse learners. They might consider the practices modelled after the transliteracy initiatives advocates by Velasco & Garcia (2014), the “after school” Funds of Knowledge project developed by González, Moll, and Amanti (2006); the work related to productive pedagogies in Australia by Lingard, Hayes, & Mills (2003); or Kris Gutiérrez’s (2008) exploration of a Third Space and educational spaces where learners that ‘cross the line’.

### **Shifting teacher and educational leader development to a case-based approach**

Studies of preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs suggest that prospective teachers may have entrenched views of “others” and a tendency to pre-set practices or notions of a panacea that detract from culturally responsive, and learner centered practices (Cochrane-Smith Reagan, 2021; Hogarth et al., 2025) Culturally responsive teaching requires forms of teaching

and learning practices that are organic rather than prescribed a priori. We would suggest culturally responsive practices entail forms of teaching that involve case-based initiatives and critical reflexivity.<sup>viii</sup>

Hence, befitting an orientation to a case-based approach, Aboriginal educators need to be engaged in a variety of settings with a range of individuals to build their design skills, ability to make discernments and prowess as teachers. Practices in medicine provide a model that could be aspirational for education—namely a convergence of developments in health care representing what the World Health Organization has characterized as a rebalancing of rights and authority for determining health care protocols with patients and communities in particular health care settings (World Health Organization 2007).<sup>2</sup> It reflects recognition of medical support as formative and transactional tied to ethics of care, reciprocity, and respect. In promoting the needs of the individual patient in their community context, it positions medical practice as formative and transactional and promotes an ethic of cultural safety. Curtis et al. (2019) suggest:

...cultural safety encompasses a critical consciousness where healthcare professionals and healthcare organisations engage in ongoing self-reflection and self-awareness and hold themselves accountable for providing culturally safe care, as defined by the patient and their communities, and as measured through progress towards achieving health equity. (p. 16)

Culturally responsive (Gay, 2000), culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) may well be the educational counterparts of Curtis et al.'s notion of culturally safe medical practice that meets the complex and diverse health and educational needs of different people.

### **Invest in recruiting Aboriginal teachers**

While some progress has been made the proportion of Aboriginal teachers across Australis is disproportionately low. Teacher education programs have not had much success recruiting

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Aboriginals into teaching and oftentimes recruits find their experiences alienating and without support. In their review of teacher education as well as their survey of some 33 teacher education programs, Lambert and Burnett (2012) reported a history of shortcomings relative to Aboriginal teachers, the programs to support them, the failure to integrate Aboriginal understandings into the curriculum and the difficulties (verging on racism) preservice teachers encounter in their programs. As they noted: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly underrepresented in Australia, making up less than 1% of teachers in schools. Although the need to increase the numbers of Indigenous teachers has been highlighted for many years, nationally, little has changed since the 1980s when Hughes and Willmot (1992) called for 1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990. (Lambert & Burnett, 2012, p.1)

Added to the shortage of teachers in preparation programs, the programs themselves have limitations. As Lambert and Burnett (2012) reported, Indigenous individuals engaged in preservice teacher preparation often experience a sense of estrangement in mainstream Eurocentric tertiary institutions. Case studies of Aboriginal students enrolled in teacher preparation programs report experiencing a lack of respect, a failure to find content relevant to their experiences within their community; and a lack of regard for Indigenous ways of knowing (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017). Essentially, they experience a form of displacement as they contend with the assimilative tendencies of these programs and the separation from their community and culture. There are exceptions but they are few.<sup>ix</sup>

Teacher development extends to an educators ongoing professional practice in schools. While some examples of ongoing professional development have been championed and some of the necessary ingredients for success have been identified, their establishment and implementation across communities are not always straightforward. They depend upon leadership within the school and recognition of the importance of ongoing nurturing and support for teachers as learners especially within different settings. <sup>x</sup>

**Integrating digital tools and AI as complements to responsive teaching and participatory student learning across diverse circumstances.**

Current reform efforts have begun to tout the integration of digital tools into the curriculum, but we would question whether or not they miss the mark if examined against discussions of equity tied to diversity as well as what has been termed the “new multiple literacies”. With regard to equity, applications enlisting generative AI (e.g., NSWEdChat) are sometimes touted as a way of ensuring equity via access to “a level playing field”. We fear that there is a danger such applications may discount the possibility of organic customized approaches that are derived from a consideration for the diverse and differential needs of individual learners—especially non-mainstream learners such as Aboriginal learners. Educational endeavors should be crafted, and we would suggest that such craftsmanship is more likely the domain of teachers based upon ongoing observations and interactions with learners rather than the pre-set algorithms of AI.

Digital resources offer platforms for new forms of participation and access to a rich palate of tools. They offer what has been termed opportunities for learners to engage in new and multiple literacies, including:

- Opportunities for learners to engage in planning, navigating, problem-solve, develop projects. In turn, to share and generate reports and communications that involve transmediation across multimodal and multilayered virtual and real platforms, for a range of ongoing purposes.
- Affordances for learners that include engaging with networks—locally, regionally, and globally—for meaningful communication, support, feedback and responses.

AI may be enlisted as a complement to student learning but should not displace local community engagements and replace a teacher’s discernments of individual learners and community interfaces needs and possible activities and actions aligned with such judgments.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Developing better measures of Aboriginal learning outcomes and supporting Aboriginal students learning to learn**

David Kemp MP, Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, suggested to the Curriculum Corporation 6<sup>th</sup> National Conference (6-7 May 1999) in an extended discussion of these issues:

We can't be sure that our education system is serving all young Australians as they deserve unless we have ways of measuring and reporting the outcomes of schooling nationally. The community has a reasonable expectation that the massive public and private investment in school education should lead to appropriate improvements in skill levels and general educational attainment of our young people. To determine the extent of improvement in broad terms, data has to be collected about how students are accessing schooling, the ways they are participating in it, how they are achieving, and where they are going after they leave school. Good accountability relies on good reporting-at all levels, the school level, the systemic authority or State level, and nationally. If we are to have a school system for the next millennium, which meets the expectations and has the confidence of the Australian community, then we must have mechanisms in place that allow us to measure the key outcomes of all Australian schools and report these outcomes to the Australian community. We need to make clear our expectations for all schools-government and nongovernment schools alike.

On first glance, these developments may seem worthwhile as they mandate that schools be accountable to all students by requiring schools to report the achievement of various subgroups. On closer examination, these reform efforts may give the appearance of supporting minority interests, but we question whether they provide true measures of learners befitting socio-cultural consideration. Of relevance to socio-cultural considerations, do our assessments credibly measure Aboriginal learning in ways that do not discount the diverse assets of these learners? Do our measurements support an orientation to learners that respects and builds upon the diverse nature of the learners that are assessed? Unfortunately, oftentimes those assessing students want to remove any cultural biases rather than recognize diversity as integral assets for reading. They often pursue culture free items and analysis procedures as a way of neatening the data in hopes of affording straight forward comparisons that are newsworthy but of questionable educational merit.

For years the developers of standardized tests and national assessment measures such as NAPLAN have retreated from dealing with issue of nonuniformity and diversity as they have pursued the development of scales for straight-forward comparisons across individuals. In conjunction with doing this, they have often revised their assessment instruments to ensure that

results fit their models that afford economies of testing. To these ends, they are apt to exclude items on topics tied to specific cultural interests and to remove items that show an advantage for one group over another—especially if such a group is considered a minority.

Certainly, there is always a tension between a need for uniformity across individuals and groups and the use of procedures that are sensitive to the different learning trajectories and profiles of students. Indeed, studies across cultures, across classrooms, and within classrooms suggest that different students respond in different ways to different forms of assessment depending upon their histories-cultural, classroom, linguistic or personal. In a courtroom, it would be considered illegal to exclude different kinds of evidence. In education, the dependency upon a limited range of assessments precludes that possibility and make judicious decision-making more of an exception.<sup>xii</sup>

### **In sum**

Our overriding thesis is that we need to shift from a uniform managerial approach to a socio-cultural framework that situates learning locally and approaches development organically. Such a socio-cultural foundation for teaching and learning may be a significant break from the preoccupation with a “one size fits all” model of curriculum and “culture-free” testing that pervades a great deal guidance for schools.<sup>xiii</sup> It suggests an expanded curriculum beyond a focus on just reception to participatory forms of communal engagements. A socio-cultural perspective should extend the focus of schooling to include learners in the following:

- Opportunities to engage in a range of projects that are relevant.
- Learning engagements that respect their voices and life experiences.
- Access to resources and strategies—in ways that meet their own needs and befit the cultural norms and expectations of communities.
- The possibility of being involved in learning venues across multiple planes of engagement with multiple perspectives and at different stages, simultaneously.
- Opportunities to develop a critical consciousness that includes participating morally and ethically with others, in both virtual and face-to-face communications.
- Supportive environments by which they might enlarge their own perspectives and engage with the perspectives of others (be they similar or different).

Such changes would entail a focus on learners as socially and culturally engaged. It would entail and reflect a commitment to cultural responsiveness toward individuals and groups including families and communities. It suggests an orientation to educators as community based cultural workers committed to organic and collaborative changes that have resonance with respect and relevance. It would require a shift to supporting school-based and community partnered decision-making aligned with cultural responsiveness and not bridled by state mandated policies that might be anchored in assimilative tendencies.

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## Appendix

### I. New South Wales Department of Education Strategic Plan (2024): a sampling of comments pertaining to goals, meeting the needs of Aboriginal learners and measuring successes

In their strategic plan updated March 2025, New South Wales Department of Education suggest the following.

Our goal is to ensure every student is engaged and challenged to continue to learn, and every student, every teacher, every leader and every school improves every year. Under the School Success Model, all schools will set local measures focused on HSC achievement, attendance, growth in reading and numeracy, phonics screening, wellbeing and pathways for school leavers.

Aboriginal Education is addressed in comments pertaining to equity. Specifically, the report indicates that “Our education system reduces the impact of disadvantage”. Specific to Aboriginal students, the report states

- We ensure that every student has access to high-quality public education.
- We respect diversity and the views and contributions of others.
- We treat people fairly.

Toward these ends and as a way of being accountable, they have identified a range of success measures including:

A sense of belonging  
 NAPLAN measures  
 Attendance  
 High school completions  
 Pathways—further training and university access

The report recognizes the dearth of Aboriginal teachers as a gap and indicate efforts will be undertaken to address the shortfall. In turn, they indicate a commitment to “fewer teacher vacancies, reduced loads and better support”.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/strategies-and-reports/plan-for-nsw-public-education/past-plans/strategic-plan#Our0>

### II. Artificial Intelligence rollout in an effort to address equity: NSW Department’s proposed AI support

Roll out of an application involving generative artificial Intelligence (NSWEduChat-designed by the Department) has been announced as a solution that will address matters of equity. Following trials in various schools, the Ministry for Education and Early Learning announced the roll out of

AI support for students. The Ministry claims the expansion will also help to bridge the digital divide by ensuring students (Grades 5-12) have equal access to this free education tool in the classroom.” (September 22, 2025). As the Acting Minister states: “By making our free and effective AI tool available to all year five to 12 students, we are levelling the playing field when it comes to AI education in the classroom and ensuring that our educators, staff and students are at the forefront of emerging technologies.”

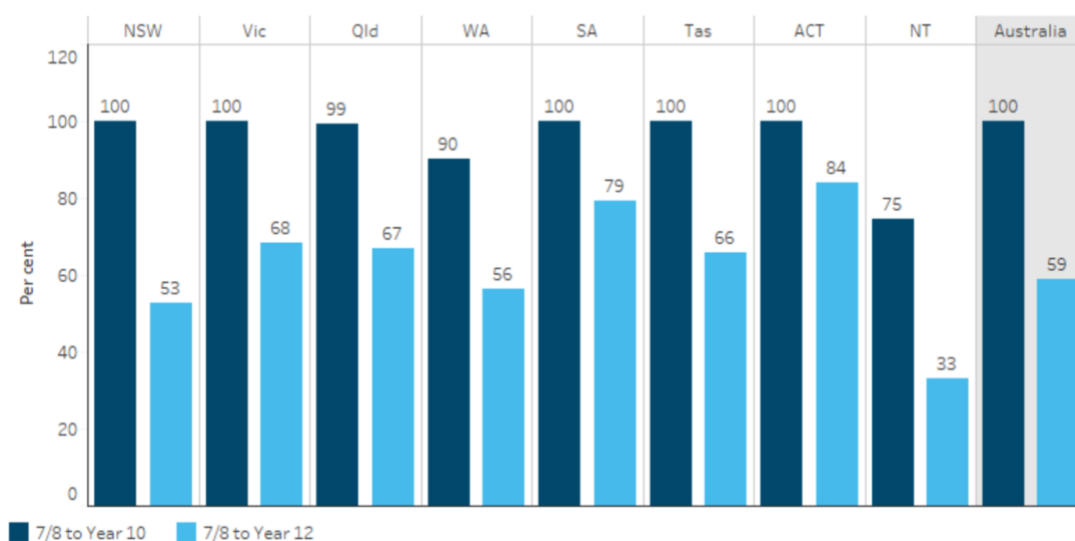
Some of the suggested uses of the AI tool (NSWEduChat) include:

- General feedback on writing
- Brainstorming support for tasks
- Virtual assistant, including supporting planning to complete assessment tasks, prepare for exams, etc.
- Consolidating learning e.g., prompting NSWEduChat with content from lesson and asking it to generate a quiz
- Planning and structuring written responses

<https://www.nsw.gov.au/ministerial-releases/nsw-to-roll-out-purpose-built-ai-education-tool-to-all-public-school-students-from-year-5>

<sup>i</sup> In 2021, the national apparent retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 for Indigenous students was 59%, compared with 84.5% for other students (Table D2.05.2)

**Figure 2.05.1: Apparent retention rate of Indigenous students, by jurisdiction and school years retained 2021**



<https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-05-education-outcomes-for-young-people#datafindings>

<sup>ii</sup> According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare On an average night in the June quarter 2024:

- about 2 in 3 (65%) young people aged 10–17 in detention were First Nations, while First Nations people in this age group make up 6.6% of the general population
- of First Nations young people aged 10–17, 27 per 10,000 were in detention
- First Nations young people aged 10–17 were 27 times as likely as non-Indigenous young people aged 10–17 to be in detention.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-detention-population-in-australia-2024/contents/first-nations-young-people/key-findings>

<sup>iii</sup> Across the 6 Australian jurisdictions with detailed data, suicide rates for First Nations males aged 0–24 years were around 2.8 times higher than for non-Indigenous males of the same age between 2019 and 2023.

- **Prevalence in younger age groups:** For First Nations people aged 0–24, suicide accounts for approximately 1 in 5 deaths (20.7%).
- **Early deaths:** First Nations children aged 10–14 die by suicide at a rate nearly seven times higher than non-Indigenous children of the same age.
- [https://www.google.com/search?q=suicides+australian+aboriginal+youth&rlz=1C5CHFA\\_enCA1021CA1024&oq=suicides+australian+aboriginal+youth&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIJCAEQIRgKKGKABMgkIAhAhGAoYoAEyCQgDECEYChigATIJCACQIRgKKGKABMgkIBRAhGAoYoAHSACQg5MDA zAjBqNKgCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=suicides+australian+aboriginal+youth&rlz=1C5CHFA_enCA1021CA1024&oq=suicides+australian+aboriginal+youth&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIJCAEQIRgKKGKABMgkIAhAhGAoYoAEyCQgDECEYChigATIJCACQIRgKKGKABMgkIBRAhGAoYoAHSACQg5MDA zAjBqNKgCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<sup>iv</sup> For example, the Institute of Health and Welfare they point to how the trauma of displacement and assimilation contribute. As they state Aboriginal populations have experienced: a long history of trauma, cultural dispossession, and forced displacement and assimilation, which affects their physical, mental and social wellbeing. These include

- Disconnection from family and kinship systems, from Country, from spirituality and cultural practices, as well as the loss of parenting practices, are sources of trauma that can be passed from caregiver to child. First Nations people's experience of child welfare policies has historically been traumatic, with the policy of forcible removal of children leading to what is now known as the Stolen Generations.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-detention-population-in-australia-2024/contents/understanding-youth-detention-in-australia/first-nations-young-people>

<sup>v</sup> Some of the government mandates on teaching reading with an emphasis on phonics as a panacea are ill-informed (see Tierney & Pearson, 2024)

<sup>vi</sup> To illustrate, take Joanne Archibald's description of kinds of learning experiences that colonization displaced in her First Nations community in British Columbia

...educational expectations and the roles of all villagers ...reflected the values of sharing, cooperation, and respect for the environment, oneself, and others. The curriculum content included training in cultural, historical, environmental, and physical (body) knowledge. Community members and the environment became teaching resources, individual empowerment in and responsibility for education created a lifelong learning process. .... The educational process was not static; it allowed for adaptation to environmental change and outside cultural influences. These changes were controlled and directed by the Sto: lo people until the arrival of the missionaries. (Archibald, 1995, p. 292)

<sup>vii</sup> For example, improvements in the subskills of reading are not enough especially if they do not transfer to reading for understanding and a learner's ability to do so independently. That may befit forms of scripted teaching versus approaches that integrate reading for meaning from the outset of learning to read. Further they would pursue ongoing learning supports for learners that are customized to build upon situated forms of learning as well as focused upon developing independent learners.



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<sup>viii</sup> Case based approaches have been shown to be successful in developing the forms of problem solving and flexibility that professionals need to navigate the types of complexities that are entailed in responding to different learners. (Sporo et al., 1988)N

<sup>ix</sup> For example, in Canada the National Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) has satellite programs in remote areas to serve Aboriginal teacher recruits locally. In Australia, forms of satellite programs need further development. With few exceptions, teacher preparation programs require a major relocation for the aspiring preservice teacher.

<sup>x</sup> In the 60's a major effort was made to recruit an Aboriginal teaching force (Hughes & Willmot, 1992) We need a similar and more expansive initiative to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners today. At a school level, there have been notable successes in communities such as Menindee. In other communities, teacher development efforts have often struggled.

<sup>xi</sup> The work by Henry Jenkins and his colleagues at MIT illuminates the need for a different orientation toward digital engagements. For example, building upon the work of Dyson (1995) and McEneaney (2006), the notion of participatory culture has been used by Jenkins and his colleagues to describe digital engagements. As Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, and Weigel (2008) define participatory culture, they suggest that it involves:

a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices ... one in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

As Jenkins et al. (2008) emphasize, "participatory culture shifts the focus ... from one of individual expression to community involvement. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. The digital devices are a platform to support learning not as an end unto themselves or to displace learner engagements. They are viewed as resources—as sites for innovation, experimentation and discovery across various sources. In this regard, curriculum might take their lead from the forms of tools that can be enlisted in science curriculum stemming from local investigations of the learners' worlds or from art or music educators where learners engage with the art and music of communities.

<sup>xii</sup> If such evidence is to be considered, it may be that there is need for a new partnership between schools, teachers and policy makers if we to obtain credible data or a variety of different kinds of evidence for educational decision-making (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2007). If we were to "assess assessment" we would hope that we measure the assessments by the quality of information they provide including whether they help teachers teach and students learn. Do assessments support teachers' consideration of pedagogical possibilities and a learner's ability to assess themselves (develop the abilities to identify their strengths and needs as well as set goals and initiate pursuits) across a range of engagements (both process and outcomes)? Befitting the notion that one of the key foci of education should be upon helping students learn to learn, we would suggest that assessment regimens should extend to engaging students in self-assessment reviewing their endeavors en route to their purpose setting and to formulate and act upon their learning goals. Students should be encouraged to be partners in their own learning pursuits including their involvement in assessments and formulation of learning goals.

<sup>xiii</sup> Most recently, the Department of Education Regional Commissioner's offers perhaps the most comprehensive review and set of recommendations to date of such considerations. We hope the discussion in the present paper complements and extends some of the recommendation in ways that align with an orientation to the view stated in the commissioner's foreword. In which she stated:

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A one size fits all approach to policymaking must be avoided. What is needed in regional, rural and remote Australia is different to what is needed in the city. Indeed, as regional people know, there are also distinct differences between individual regional, rural and remote communities. (Department of Education, 2025, v)