



Department of Education,
Science and Training

Teaching the Teachers Aboriginal Studies: Impact on Teaching

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Contents

Tables	3
Figures	4
Acknowledgements	5
Executive summary	6
1 Project rationale and purpose	12
1.1 Introduction	12
1.2 Background and context	12
1.3 Project purpose and objectives	17
1.4 Overview of research design	18
1.4.1 Instrumentation	18
1.4.2 Procedures for Phase 1: survey	19
1.4.3 Procedures for Phase 2: telephone interviews and open-ended survey questions	20
1.5 Summary	20
2 Sample characteristics: Phase 1 teacher survey	22
2.1 Introduction	22
2.2 Aims	22
2.3 Research methodology	22
2.4 Characteristics of the sample	24
2.5 Summary	32
3 Results: Phase 1 teacher survey	34
3.1 Introduction	34
3.2 Key content of teacher education subject	34
3.3 Topics taught in teacher education subject	35
3.4 Topics taught or drawn upon by participating teachers	38
3.5 Impact on teachers' self-concept	40
3.6 Extent to which teachers value the teaching of Aboriginal Studies in schools	43
3.7 Teachers' knowledge of departmental policy and teachers' evaluations of students' knowledge	45
3.8 Sources of teachers' knowledge about Aboriginal Studies	46
3.9 Teachers' written comments	50
3.10 Summary	51

4	Results: Phase 2 teacher interviews and open-ended comments	53
	4.1 Introduction	53
	4.2 The contribution of preservice teacher education	53
	4.3 Benefits of preservice Aboriginal Studies for students in schools	56
	4.4 The place of Aboriginal Studies in schools and in the curriculum	58
	4.5 Aboriginal Studies and student ethnicity	62
	4.6 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal Studies	63
	4.7 The content of preservice subjects	64
	4.8 Aboriginal Studies and Reconciliation	68
	4.9 Capacity and confidence to teach Aboriginal children	69
	4.10 Working with the community	70
	4.11 The Department of Education's mandatory Aboriginal Studies requirements	73
	4.12 Areas teachers lack confidence in addressing	73
	4.13 Suggested future directions for preservice and practising teachers	74
	4.14 Conclusion	77
5	Conclusion and issues	79
	5.1 Introduction	79
	5.2 Potential limitations in the present investigation	79
	5.3 Strengths of preservice Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects	81
	5.4 Weaknesses of preservice Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects	82
	5.5 Future directions for preservice teacher education	84
	5.6 Issues for serving teachers	84
	5.7 Summary	86
	Appendix A National Aboriginal Studies Questionnaire: Teacher Perceptions of the Structure and Impact of Initial Teacher Education Subjects	87
	Appendix B Questionnaire Breakdown (53 Items)	91
	References	94

Tables

1	Breakdown of sample by state	25
2	Breakdown of sample by gender	26
3	Teaching experience characteristics for the experimental and control groups	27
4	Location of school by experimental and control groups	28
5	Education sector by experimental and control groups	28
6	School size	29
7	Approximate number of Aboriginal students in schools	30
8	Prior teaching experience with regard to teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students	31
9	Content covered in initial teacher education subject	35
10	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups in relation to the content covered in initial teacher education subjects	37
11	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups in relation to the overall amount learned about pedagogy, history, and current issues in initial teacher education subjects	37
12	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups in relation to topics taught or drawn upon to inform teaching	39
13	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups' self-concept scores	41
14	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups for cognitive and affective components of self-concept scores	42
15	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups in relation to teacher values	44
16	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups in relation to teachers' knowledge of departmental policy and teachers' evaluations of students' knowledge	46
17	Comparisons of the experimental and control groups in relation to sources of teachers' knowledge about Aboriginal Studies	47
18	Frequency of teachers' suggestions on the structure of future teacher education subjects	49
19	Comparison of strategies identified by teachers to foster Reconciliation by teachers with and without preservice teacher education in Aboriginal Studies	69

Figures

1	States represented in sample	25
2	Types of initial teacher education in Aboriginal Studies subjects represented in the sample	26
3	Participants' teaching experience	28
4	School sizes represented in the sample	29
5	Percentage of Aboriginal students in schools represented in the sample	30
6	Teachers' experience with Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students teaching experience by experimental and control group	31
7	Key content areas covered in initial teacher education subject by experimental and control groups	35
8	Extent to which pedagogical, historical and current issues were addressed in initial teacher education subject by experimental and control groups	38
9	Pedagogical, historical and current issues taught or drawn upon by experimental and control groups	39
10	Self-concept levels by experimental and control groups	41
11	Cognitive levels of self-concept by experimental and control groups	43
12	Teacher value scores by experimental and control groups	45
13	Teachers' sources of knowledge about Aboriginal Studies by experimental and control groups	48
14	Teachers' suggestions in relation to the content of future teacher education subjects	49
15	Teachers' suggestions in relation to the structure of future teacher education subjects	50

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Executive summary

Purpose of the study

The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) under its Evaluations and Investigations Programme (EIP) commissioned this study. The project goals were supported by the New South Wales Teachers' Federation; New South Wales Primary Principals' Association; New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET); New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.; the Aboriginal Studies Association; and the Australian Council of Deans of Education.

The study employed a blend of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (telephone interviews and open-ended responses) methods to collect data from a sample of primary school teachers to:

- critically evaluate the impact of preservice primary teacher education Aboriginal Studies subjects on participating, practising teachers' self-perceived abilities to appreciate, understand and effectively teach Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal perspectives, and Aboriginal children in Australian schools
- compare and contrast the self-perceptions of participating teachers who had undertaken a core or elective subject in Aboriginal Studies in their initial teacher education course with the self-perceptions of participating teachers who had not undertaken an Aboriginal Studies subject as a component of their initial teacher education course, in relation to their perceived ability with and commitment to teaching Aboriginal Studies and teaching Aboriginal students
- characterise participating teachers' initial teacher education subjects in relation to the Aboriginal Studies content covered
- identify participating teachers' perceptions of useful structure and content to consider for inclusion in future teacher education courses, in order to strengthen preservice teachers' perceived ability to teach Aboriginal Studies and teach Aboriginal students.

Participants

The research team invited a sample of primary teachers who had undertaken either a core (compulsory) or an elective Aboriginal Studies subject as a component of their initial teacher education degree to consider participating in the study (subsequently referred to as the 'experimental' group for purposes of this study). An invitation to participate was distributed by mail to potential experimental participants via selected universities with recent graduates of core Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects and principals in New South Wales Department of Education and Training primary schools. Potential experimental participants were invited by letter to consider participating in the study by completing a survey (see Appendix A).

Experimental participants were also invited to give an envelope containing another copy of the survey and information about the study to a colleague who taught in the same school but who had not completed either a compulsory or elective Aboriginal Studies subject as a component of their preservice teacher education degree. Experimental participants were

asked to ensure, if at all possible, that the colleague chosen was the same sex and had similar teaching experience, was similar to them in as many ways as possible – the only difference being that they had not taken a core or elective Aboriginal Studies subject as part of their preservice training. These selected colleagues constituted the ‘control’ group. In most cases, the matched experimental and control teachers were from the same school, thus controlling for many possible sources of differences that are likely to exist between schools. Through this procedure, a diverse sample of 392 teachers from 201 primary schools was obtained. However, it needs to be noted that as a result of the sampling procedure, the sample is not representative of Australian primary school teachers, since it is biased towards New South Wales teachers, and towards younger teachers, as core and elective Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects have only recently been incorporated into preservice teacher education programs. Importantly, however, the intent was to obtain reasonably well-matched groups of a sample of practising teachers who had and had not completed a core or an elective Aboriginal Studies subject.

For the qualitative component of the study, a total of 18 teachers from 13 schools were invited, by letter, to participate in a half-hour telephone interview. In addition to the general aims (above), the purpose of the interviews was to develop more detailed insights into the perspectives and experiences of teachers, and to identify similarities and differences in the perspectives and experiences of teachers who had and had not completed an Aboriginal Studies subject during their preservice teacher education course. To ensure consistency in terms of the policy and organisational context of respondents’ workplaces, schools were drawn from a representative, convenient sample of schools in urban, regional and rural New South Wales, with the exception of two participants from Queensland. The sample also included three Indigenous teachers. Where possible, two teachers were interviewed in each school in order to obtain a matched pair of approximately similar age and teaching experience, except that one teacher had undertaken Aboriginal Studies during their preservice training and the second teacher had not. Of the 18 respondents, there were five matched pairs from five schools, six teachers from six schools who had undertaken preservice training, and two teachers from different schools who had not undertaken such training.

Summary of the findings and implications

Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data found that preservice Aboriginal Studies subjects do make a positive difference for teachers in the experimental group. Teachers participating in this study who had undertaken such subjects were statistically more likely to perceive themselves as knowing significantly more, both about subject matter in relation to Aboriginal history, current issues, pedagogy for teaching Aboriginal Studies, and about teaching Aboriginal students, compared with participating teachers who had not undertaken such subjects. They also had statistically significant higher self-concepts in regard to their self-perceptions of their: knowledge of Aboriginal Studies subject matter; knowledge of how to teach Aboriginal Studies; and overall perceived ability to teach Aboriginal Studies and to teach Aboriginal students effectively, compared with participating teachers who had not undertaken such subjects. In addition, participating teachers who had undertaken Aboriginal Studies preservice teacher education subjects had statistically significant higher self-concepts in relation to their perceived ability to teach Aboriginal students and their enjoyment thereof.

These results imply that teacher education courses without mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects may be strengthened in relation to preparing all

preservice teachers to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students by incorporating a mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject to ensure all preservice teachers derive the benefits from participating in an Aboriginal Studies teacher education subject.

Preservice Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects were also found to impact more on participants' cognitive components of self-concept (feelings of competence) rather than affective components of self-concept (enjoyment of teaching and learning about Aboriginal Studies). Possible explanations for this pattern of results emerged from the interview data and open-ended responses, with a number of participants identifying problematic features of preservice subjects, including modes of presentation that alienated students. If teachers enjoy teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students, they are more likely to be committed to this area.

These results imply that those teacher education institutions with mandatory and/or elective Aboriginal Studies subjects should consider evaluating whether existing subjects result in enhancing preservice teachers' enjoyment of teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students and disseminating successful strategies to achieve such a goal.

Results based on one-way ANOVAs and teacher interviews suggested that some teacher education courses may not be ensuring that teachers can adapt the content they have been taught in teacher education for application to the classroom, and that some subjects do not have an adequate focus on pedagogical skills.

These results imply that teacher education courses might be strengthened by including a focus on teaching pedagogical skills in relation to teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students.

Clear differences also existed in relation to participating teachers' perceived ability to teach Aboriginal Studies and teach Aboriginal students. Teachers who were newer to the profession were statistically significantly more likely to have completed an Aboriginal Studies subject during their preservice teacher education than their longer-serving counterparts. Almost one-third of the sample spent *no* time planning or teaching Aboriginal Studies in their classrooms. Many teachers in the control group reported that they lacked self-confidence in being able to teach Aboriginal Studies and teach Aboriginal students, which deterred them from doing so. Others did not seem to understand the importance of teaching all students about Aboriginal Studies, citing a low Aboriginal student population as a rationale for not teaching Aboriginal Studies and perspectives. These results suggest that a large number of teachers who participated in this study are not adequately prepared and do not understand the rationale either for teaching Aboriginal Studies, or for meeting the needs of Aboriginal students.

These results imply that teacher education courses could be strengthened by incorporating a mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject designed to enhance all preservice teachers' self-confidence in regard to teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students, and also their understanding of the rationale for doing so.

The study also found that some of the mandatory and elective Aboriginal Studies subjects currently available to preservice teachers would benefit from review and refinement to better meet the needs of teachers and schools. In particular, participants reported that these subjects often fail to develop skills relevant to classroom practice, especially in

relation to: teachers' self-concepts in teaching Aboriginal Studies and teaching Aboriginal students; writing units of work; developing pedagogical skills; and understanding departmental requirements. While students who had taken these subjects reported higher self-concepts in regard to their ability to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students than those who had not taken these subjects, many teachers who had taken the subjects reported that their skills in relation to classroom practice were not adequately fostered by the Aboriginal Studies teacher education courses they had undertaken.

These results imply that some mandatory and elective Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects could be further strengthened by incorporating a focus on pedagogical skills in order to enhance preservice teachers' self-concepts in relation to teaching Aboriginal Studies and teaching Aboriginal students.

Participants' responses also indicated that teacher education subjects were in effective in preparing teachers to consult with local Aboriginal communities, and to teach comparative Indigenous studies.

Given the vital nature of local Aboriginal community consultation, these results imply that some mandatory and elective Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects could be strengthened by incorporating subject matter that assists preservice teachers to consult with Aboriginal communities.

In addition, comparative Indigenous studies are expounded by educators as useful for assisting non-Indigenous students to understand the commonality of Indigenous people's experiences in the world.

As such, these results imply that some mandatory and elective Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects could be strengthened by incorporating comparative Indigenous studies subject matter.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that all teachers surveyed recognised the importance of Aboriginal Studies. In particular, participating teachers saw Aboriginal Studies as an important strategy for achieving reconciliation and developing informed citizens. Teachers who had not undertaken Aboriginal Studies in preservice teacher education, however, attached a lesser importance to Aboriginal Studies and the implementation of Education Department policies on Aboriginal Studies than did their counterparts with preservice training. This finding was explored more fully during the interviews and in the open-ended responses. Participating teachers reported that they were more likely to incorporate Aboriginal Studies content into their teaching if there were Aboriginal students in their classes, with a number of teachers arguing that Aboriginal Studies are no more important than multicultural education. Thus, the data revealed that many participating teachers, particularly teachers who had not undertaken a core or elective Aboriginal Studies subject, did not necessarily view Aboriginal Studies as important for *all* Australians.

These results imply that introducing mandatory subjects could assist all teachers to recognise the importance of implementing Education Department policies, and that some teacher education courses may benefit from the inclusion of content which enables teachers to appreciate the rationale for teaching all Australian students Aboriginal Studies.

While most participating teachers claimed to have a sound knowledge of Education

Department policies vis-a-vis Aboriginal Education issues, a number of teachers reported that they had never seen relevant policy documents in their state/territory. The latter finding calls into question the extent to which these teachers are meeting the educational and philosophical agendas set by Departments of Education.

These results imply that some teacher education courses could be strengthened by familiarising preservice teachers with national and state/territory Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal education policies and developing preservice teachers' appreciation of the underpinning rationale for existing policies.

A number of teachers in the study (the control group) had never undertaken preservice, postgraduate or inservice Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects. By design half the participants (the control group) had not undertaken preservice Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects. However, all participants were asked whether they had undertaken any other form of postgraduate education in Aboriginal Studies. In terms of further study and professional development, the study found that teachers who had completed preservice training were more likely to benefit from and undertake further training in the area.

These findings suggest that undertaking an introductory Aboriginal Studies teacher education course could help to encourage teachers to undertake further professional development courses.

Participating teachers also identified a range of areas where they believed additional support would help to improve student outcomes, including the development of resources appropriate for school students, and funding of Aboriginal education consultants and Aboriginal Education Assistants to assist and advise teachers.

These findings suggest that it may be useful for education systems to consider whether additional human and material Aboriginal Studies resources might result in enhancing desired student outcomes.

Participants in the interviews particularly noted that Aboriginal Studies require proactive support from school principals and senior staff in schools. Participants commented that this high-level support was not always forthcoming, suggesting that policy and program initiatives are required to redress this lack.

These findings suggest that it might be useful for education systems to consider developing and evaluating the impact of professional development programs to target senior school staff.

Participants offered a range of suggestions for improving the quality of preservice Aboriginal Studies subjects in universities. There was a strong view that Aboriginal Studies should be included in preservice teacher education subjects as a mandatory subject. Participants also suggested that elective subjects could not ensure that the entire teaching profession was adequately equipped to teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students. Nevertheless, teachers also argued that Aboriginal Studies should also be available as an elective subject as well as a core subject to cater for those with special interests or needs, and integrated into curriculum subjects in the Key Learning Areas in teacher education to ensure the effective transfer of Aboriginal Studies into applied contexts.

These results imply that, ideally, teacher education courses should adopt a multifaceted approach to the teaching of Aboriginal Studies, whereby

courses include a mandatory subject, elective subjects and perspectives integrated across the curriculum.

These findings offer support for the introduction of mandatory Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects. Empirical evidence supporting these findings is provided in the following chapters. The findings also offer teacher education institutions insights into some promising strategies for strengthening teacher education courses in relation to Aboriginal Studies subject matter. The findings also suggest that, ideally, teacher education courses should be based on a multifaceted approach to prepare teachers to understand and teach Aboriginal Studies effectively.