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Is Keeping Open the Educational Gaps a Form of Collective Insanity?

In [The Conversation](#)¹ today, ACDE Board member, Professor Peter Buckskin, wrote the following article:

Closing the Gap on Indigenous Education Must Start with Commitment and Respect

There were angry rumblings at last week's meeting of Indigenous leaders and the Prime Minister² and in the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee Report.³ They will get significantly louder with today's release of the 10th Annual Closing the Gap Report.

Blame will mostly fall to successive governments for the few wins and the many failures of the past decade.

Many will again shake their heads at governments' seeming inability to work consistently in genuine partnership with First Nations Peoples, in community-owned, systemically-targeted, co-ordinated ways that evidence tells us are most likely to be effective.

Yet again, those of us who have spent our lives in Indigenous education will point to the insanity of thinking that myriad health issues can be tackled without also adequately addressing other key social and cultural determinants like education⁴.

Education and health are known to be highly correlated – that is, more education indicates better health and vice versa.

World Health Organisation⁵

In 2011 Prime Minister and Cabinet allocated \$8 million over four years for the *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Initiative* (MATSITI)⁶ to attract, support and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and teacher education academics.

When MATSITI started we did not know the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education students in our universities. There was a 'them and us' feeling with Education Deans, as well as a public lack of recognition of the importance of role models in classrooms to help lift student aspirations and achievement, and to provide a rich and deep understanding of Aboriginal culture and knowledges in all Australian classrooms.

However, through a strategic approach to tackling these wicked issues by working on many levels, MATSITI eventually grew to more than 57 projects with many educational partners under a holistic, national framework⁷.

¹ <http://ow.ly/5QWA30ikLEg>

² <https://closingthegaprefresh.pmc.gov.au/>

³ https://nationalcongress.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/CTG-2018_FINAL_WEB-8th-Feb-2018.pdf?utm_source=TractionNext&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=Insider-Subscribe-090218

⁴ See the Web of Disadvantage in 2015. Vinson et al. *Dropping off the Edge Report*,

⁵ Mark Suhreke. *The impact of health and health behaviours on educational outcomes in high-income countries: a review of the evidence*. World Health Organisation.

⁶ <http://matsiti.edu.au/about/plans/>

⁷ <http://matsiti.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/MATSITI-Final-Report-1.0.pdf>

Among the many MATSITI achievements were:

- Improvements in the data scoping the workforce
- Determining how and when students needed support to complete teacher education studies
- An increase in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers
- The recognition of the need to encourage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, and
- Provision of inspiration to future educators through those who are now becoming role models in our classrooms.

Yet, five years of MATSITI was only the beginning – remember it takes four years to earn an undergraduate teaching degree.

In June 2016, Peter Johnson, Chair of the MATSITI Evaluation Report⁸ Panel, told an ACDE Indigenous Education forum that the Federal Government ‘cannot walk away’ from investing in attracting and retaining more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

‘It defies belief that a Federal Government cannot find \$2 to \$2.5 million each year over the coming years’ to embed strategies to improve Indigenous education in universities and schools,’ he said⁹.

Yet the many recommendations of MATSITI¹⁰ and its subsequent independent evaluation have, in the main, been ignored. It’s ground-breaking work left to languish through government inertia since 2016.

Last September the Education Deans were heartened when the Federal Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, supported the need for strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models in classrooms for all Australian students and improvement in cultural awareness, appreciation and respect. He told an ACDE meeting that he would meet me to discuss future actions.

Yet, despite repeated attempts on our part, there has been not been a meeting and it’s now more than 18 months since MATSITI finished. I still welcome that meeting.

The 2016 ABS census shows an increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to 11823 which represents 2% of the all Australian teachers¹¹. However, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has increased to 206065, meaning they now comprise 5.5% of all Australian primary and secondary students¹².

It’s often said that ‘we can’t be what we can’t see’ but there is still only one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher for approximately every 17 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

⁸ <http://matsiti.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MATSITI-2016-Project-Evaluation-Final-Report.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.acde.edu.au/media/media-release-archive/>

¹⁰ [Matsiti.edu.au](http://matsiti.edu.au)

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census. Industry by Employment Occupation using Table Builder data.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, 4221.0 - Schools, Australia, 2017. Table 80a Summary Tables 2008-2016. Canberra

The National Professional Standards¹³ require all teachers to be competent in:

- (Focus area 1.2) *Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*; and
- (Focus area 2.4) *Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.*

So this is about ensuring true professionalisation of the teacher workforce, with access, understanding and inclusion, as well addressing the huge achievement gaps¹⁴ between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students.

Only one in every three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education students currently graduates so we must lift the completion rates for these students, who are often the first in their family to go into tertiary education.

There are large holes in the data that would allow for more nuanced actions to improve pathways into teaching and the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education students and teachers.

We must work harder to alleviate the current shortages of all teachers – especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers – in remote and regional schools.

The failed and continually failing political leadership on Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation sets back the quality of current and future education for all Australians.

For further information:

Leslie Falkiner-Rose, ACDE Strategy and Communications. 0418 995240. leslie@falkiner-rose.com.

David Templeman, ACDE Executive Director. 02 6162 4480. 0431 283 969.
David.templeman@acde.edu.au.

¹³ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/deliver-ite-programs/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education>

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/educational-disadvantage-is-a-huge-problem-in-australia-we-cant-just-carry-on-the-same-74530>