



Working with Aboriginal Communities

A Guide to Community Consultation and Protocols

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Foreword

Consultation with Aboriginal communities is essential in the development of meaningful Aboriginal perspectives and studies across the curriculum. The involvement of Aboriginal people in the development and implementation of learning programs allows a genuine exploration of Aboriginal history, culture and contemporary issues. Building a relationship between schools and their local Aboriginal community will enhance the learning experience of students, and promote Reconciliation through better understanding.

This document was developed to support teachers in their implementation of the Aboriginal perspectives included across the curriculum, and was written in consultation with communities, Aboriginal education workers, consultants and teachers. Many teachers have expressed a need for some clear guidelines to begin the process of consulting with local Aboriginal communities to allow them to include Aboriginal people in their teaching. *Working with Aboriginal Communities* provides advice on how to start this process and encourage a relationship with the local Aboriginal community.

Observing appropriate protocols when working with Aboriginal people and their communities is critical to establishing positive and respectful relationships. Consulting with Aboriginal communities should always be seen as a two-way process, with both parties learning together and from each other.

Providing Aboriginal people with the opportunity to become involved in school programs gives authenticity to local Aboriginal perspectives. Students, schools and communities all benefit from encouraging Aboriginal people to share their knowledge and life stories.

Charles Davison
President
NSW Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group Inc.

Gordon Stanley
President
Board of Studies NSW

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Peta Hill, who took the photographs throughout this book, is gratefully acknowledged.

A note on terminology

It is important to note that the term ‘Aboriginal’ is more appropriate than ‘Aborigine’, and should always be used when referring to Aboriginal people, their history and culture.

Acronyms used in this document

ACLO	Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer
AEA	Aboriginal Education Assistant
AECG	NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.
AEW	Aboriginal Education Worker
ANTaR	Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation
ASSPA	Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CDEP	Community Development Employment Program
CEC	Catholic Education Commission
DET	NSW Department of Education and Training
DETYA	Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
DOCS	Department of Community Services
FATSIL	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation of Languages
HSIE	Human Society and its Environment
TAFE	Technical and Further Education

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Part 1 – Introduction

1.1 Rationale

To enable teachers and schools to establish a learning partnership with Aboriginal communities, it is vital to be aware of the protocols of community consultation. Aboriginal people are the owners and custodians of their knowledge and culture. They have the right to be consulted when aspects of Aboriginal history and culture are being incorporated into the school curriculum.

In the Key Learning Area *Human Society and Its Environment*, Aboriginal perspectives and significant areas of content – including studies of Aboriginal communities, their histories and cultures – have become part of the K–10 curriculum. Many other key learning areas also provide scope for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. As custodians of their cultures and languages, Aboriginal people alone possess the necessary knowledge, skills and experiences to give authenticity to Aboriginal studies and perspectives in schools. Where applicable, they should be approached to provide this.

The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum has led many educators to recognise the value of including Aboriginal people in their planning and teaching. However, some have been unsure of the most appropriate way to approach Aboriginal community members. This document aims to provide advice to schools, educators and students about the protocols for community consultation; in outlining appropriate steps it will help build learning partnerships between schools, teachers and Aboriginal communities.

When implementing Aboriginal perspectives it is vital that local Aboriginal history and culture be included. Aboriginal nations throughout Australia have very diverse histories and cultures. A local study gives meaning to an examination of the similarities and differences between the contemporary experiences of many Aboriginal communities.

1.2 Who is this document for?

This document is designed to support educators in the implementation of Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal studies as part of the school curriculum. It provides advice on how to seek support in developing Aboriginal perspectives, strategies for starting the consultation process, and guidance in developing working relationships with Aboriginal communities.

Teachers, schools, students and administrative staff can use the advice in the document to develop a strong relationship with their local Aboriginal community. Communities can also use the document as a tool for approaching Consultants and Aboriginal education workers in order to become involved in the planning and implementation of Aboriginal studies and perspectives in all key learning areas.

1.3 What is consultation?

Consultation is an ongoing process that benefits all participants equally in helping to ensure that Aboriginal perspectives and studies are effectively incorporated into the curriculum. It involves establishing a respectful relationship with Aboriginal communities, and demonstrating a willingness to share, to learn and to negotiate. The sharing of knowledge is a two-way process; it follows that members of Aboriginal communities should be shown respect and should be acknowledged for their time and assistance.

Community consultation is a process that enables educators to become aware of community views and sensitivities. This will involve educators getting to know members of the local community, at the same time making people aware of what is happening in the school. Quality consultation requires respect, trust and openness.

Consultation does not mean asking for permission to teach aspects of Aboriginal history and culture. It involves seeking the views and knowledge of Aboriginal people in order to develop, implement and evaluate the way Aboriginal studies and perspectives are taught at the school.

1.3.1 What are protocols?

Protocols are appropriate ways of behaving, communicating and showing respect for diversity of history and culture. This involves appreciation of the knowledge, standing and status of people within both the local Aboriginal community and the school community. Protocols inevitably vary between communities, and between people within communities. In establishing a partnership between schools and Aboriginal communities it is especially important that protocols are acknowledged and respected.

By ensuring that protocols are observed, educators can ensure that the process of community consultation is successful and beneficial to the whole school community.

1.4 Why consult Aboriginal communities?

Aboriginal perspectives are included in most areas of the curriculum, and Aboriginal studies are included in many syllabuses. Consultation is important in establishing a local focus on Aboriginal perspectives and studies. As custodians and owners of their knowledge and cultures, Aboriginal people should be consulted.

The participation of people from the local Aboriginal community allows the curriculum to be explored at a local level, making studies more relevant to students. Consultation with local Aboriginal communities allows educators to learn more appropriate pedagogy for teaching about Aboriginal issues, and to take into account the necessary sensitivities and feelings of local Aboriginal communities when developing strategies appropriate for teaching Aboriginal students.

Encouraging Aboriginal people to be involved in curriculum planning and delivery allows both teachers and students to explore Aboriginal history and culture through the life stories, practices and experiences of people from their local area. Such interaction allows Aboriginal students, non-Aboriginal students and teachers to develop mutual knowledge and understanding. It can also provide cultural affirmation and pride for Aboriginal students. Regular and ongoing interaction with members of the local Aboriginal community will assist in developing appropriate materials for presentation to students.

1.5 Considering sensitive issues

Many of the issues included in the NSW curriculum are particularly sensitive for some Aboriginal people and communities. It is critical that educators recognise social and political issues – among others, Aboriginal deaths in custody, the Stolen Generation, Reconciliation, Native Title, Land Rights, social dislocation, racism – as ongoing matters that many Aboriginal people find it difficult to speak about, particularly to strangers.

It should also be borne in mind that there are sensitive Aboriginal cultural and spiritual issues and beliefs which are equally important in this context. For example, when discussing the Dreaming and Creation it is appropriate that educators consult with Aboriginal communities and invite them to be part of programming and lesson development. Dreaming and Creation stories belong to Aboriginal communities and it is important that their custodianship be acknowledged. Aspects of Aboriginal spirituality need to be dealt with in the same sensitive manner as all contemporary religions, not presented as myths and stories. Different realms of information exist. One of these realms is public and accessible. The other is definitely secret and reserved for private discussion between privileged people within the community. While information and pictures may be available on such topics, it is vital that local Aboriginal people be consulted before using resources such as these.

1.6 A coordinated approach to Aboriginal education

To ensure a coordinated approach to the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and community consultation it is advisable that schools have an Aboriginal education contact person or network. This person or network would be responsible for developing and maintaining the school's relations with the local Aboriginal community. They could coordinate the organising of participation by guests, and the monitoring of Aboriginal perspectives and studies across all areas of the curriculum. They could also make regular contact with departmental or diocesan Aboriginal Education Workers. The network might, for example, consist of executive staff, teachers and the Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA).

Part 2 – Consulting with Aboriginal Communities

2.1 Identifying a process

While the process of consultation might differ depending on the knowledge and needs of teachers, the following is a guide to assist teachers in working with local Aboriginal communities.

Within this process there might be multiple entry points according to individual teachers' existing knowledge of and relationships with local Aboriginal people. This might include the history of relationships between the school and the local Aboriginal community, or the availability of Aboriginal support staff. However, even in cases where teachers have a fund of knowledge, it might still be advisable to revisit the consultation process.

The consultation process can consist of the following sequence and will assist teachers in commencing this rewarding process:

- identifying the local Aboriginal community
- identifying the local AECG
- contacting systemic support networks
- considering protocols
- making contact
- getting to know the community.

2.2 Identifying the local Aboriginal community

In NSW there are over 70 different Aboriginal language groups. As a result of past government legislation, practices and policies, many Aboriginal people were dispossessed from their land and forced to resettle in different designated areas. Such forced relocation of individuals and family groups has contributed to the current diversity within many communities. As a consequence many Aboriginal people identify with more than one community. A key component of a community's identity will be drawn from their identification with a particular language nation. Even if people have moved, their sense of belonging and their family connections still associate them with this home country.

Some schools have large and accessible Aboriginal communities where communication between the school and the community has been well established. They may have Aboriginal students and their families, an Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committee, an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) or other Aboriginal staff. Such a school will naturally find it easier to initiate community consultation than will a school where there is no identifiable community in the immediate vicinity or in the school's drawing area. If this is the case, schools could look to local Aboriginal community organisations such as the NSW AECG Inc, local Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal Medical or Legal Services.

2.2.1 The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (NSW AECG Inc.)

The NSW AECG Inc. is acknowledged by educational authorities as being the peak Aboriginal advisory body in regard to education issues. As a community-based organisation, the NSW local and regional AECGs are able to provide advice and guidance for educators about the delivery of Aboriginal perspectives and studies in government and non-government schools. While not all schools have access to a local AECG, the AECG Secretariat is able to provide details of the nearest Group. They can be contacted by phoning (02) 9550 5666 or faxing (02) 9550 3361.

2.3 Systemic support networks

The major education providers have established support networks for Aboriginal education. These people can be the first point of contact for schools and facilitate introduction to members of the local Aboriginal community. They can also provide continued guidance and advice on all matters relating to Aboriginal education.

Within the Department of Education and Training the following personnel are available:

- Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers Based in District Offices
- Consultants, Aboriginal Education Based in District Offices
- Aboriginal Education Assistants Based in schools
- The Aboriginal Programs Unit Student Services and Equity Directorate
- The Aboriginal Studies Team Professional Support and Curriculum Directorate

- Aboriginal Student Liaison Officers District Offices
- Aboriginal Development Managers TAFE Institutes
- Aboriginal Student Support Officers TAFE Campuses

Within the Catholic Education system the following supports are available:

- Aboriginal Education Workers Based in Diocesan Offices
- Aboriginal Education Advisers/Officers Based in Diocesan Offices
- Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee Based in Diocesan Offices
- Catholic Education Commission
 Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee Catholic Education Commission

Schools should contact the appropriate local office for advice on the exact location of Aboriginal personnel.

2.4 Getting started with consultation

2.4.1 Considering protocols

Aboriginal people from a local community will be able to provide assistance in finding out about the specific protocols to be considered. However, the following are generally agreed in communities across NSW.

- Introductory protocols are important. Be prepared to spend time sharing personal background information about yourself and the purpose of your visit.
- Be patient when asking questions. Look, listen and learn, as it may take time for some community people to become involved. Some people may work towards giving their opinions by initially talking about other issues or stories.
- Do not expect every Aboriginal person (including students in the school) to know about or want to talk publicly about Aboriginal cultures, families, histories or issues.
- Some Aboriginal people might not openly express an opinion. They may choose to talk indirectly about an issue if they do not agree with the previous speaker. Not all Aboriginal people will share the same opinions and feelings. All opinions should be acknowledged and valued.
- In some communities, direct eye contact may be expected and accepted because of your teaching role. In others, however, it may be considered offensive. The use of direct eye contact differs from community to community, and from individual to individual. Protocols will need to be determined for specific cases. Contact your departmental or diocesan workers for advice.
- The use of silence should not be misunderstood. It may mean people do not want to express an opinion at that point in time, or they are listening and reflecting about what has been said. It is important that this silence is respected and not interrupted unnecessarily. Silence is not a chance to take a break or leave the room, but rather an opportunity to contemplate what is being spoken about.
- There are different types of knowledge – for example, spiritual knowledge and scientific knowledge – and these may conflict. One should be sensitive to these differences when talking to an Aboriginal person about issues and experiences.
- Do not force a point of view. Aboriginal people and communities have knowledge that may differ from yours. Remember you are there to seek their knowledge and opinions.
- Use language that respects the integrity and beliefs of the person or group with whom you are meeting. Avoid jargon and do not use acronyms.
- Be prepared to accept that some questions may remain unanswered – for example, sacred/secret knowledge or knowledge from people who have not grown up with their cultural ties.
- Family obligations and funerals affect many people in an Aboriginal community and may impact on previous obligations made to a school. Immediate and extended family obligations will always take first priority.
- Deaths can affect not just one family but a whole community. Refer to systemic Aboriginal support personnel as to the local protocols regarding speaking the name of a person who has passed away, and showing their photograph.
- Remember that different families have different values and cultural beliefs, even if they are from the same community.
- Consult with a variety of community people.

2.4.2 Making contact

There is a variety of ways in which you can make initial contact with the local Aboriginal community. If your school has an ASSPA committee, ask if you may attend their next meeting with the AEA and be introduced to the parents. The parents of Aboriginal students run ASSPA committees, and meet to discuss a wide variety of educational issues impacting on their children.

Schools that do not have those immediate contacts should first approach their nearest Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer or Aboriginal Education Worker. These people are part of the education system and understand your needs, but are also part of the Aboriginal community and have a great knowledge of community resources. If your school has an AEA, this person may be able to assist you.

Arrange a meeting with an officer in your local area to discuss what you would like to do with your class, and they will assist in starting the consultation process. Usually these officers are part of the community, they know the most appropriate person for you to contact, and can arrange for you to be introduced to them. Other staff such as Consultants, Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Education Advisers can help to facilitate this process. It is much better to make contact with people via departmental/diocesan staff or through an Aboriginal organisation than to approach Aboriginal people without having been formally introduced.

It is important that a rapport be established with members of your local Aboriginal community. Be aware that people might not offer their knowledge and assistance at first. The process will take time and must be based on mutual respect. This rapport can be established in a number of ways, some of which are outlined below.

2.4.3 Getting to know the community

Once initial contact has been made through departmental/diocesan officers or parents it is recommended that teachers make themselves known to the wider community. A good way to meet community people is to attend a local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group meeting. For details of the closest local AECG contact the NSW AECG Inc. Secretariat.

Local AECG meetings are held on a regular basis. People who work in the area of education and other interested parents and community people meet to discuss important educational issues impacting on Aboriginal students. As a consultative group, a local AECG can provide advice on a wide range of educational issues, including: appropriate activities, guests for a class and assistance in many areas of the curriculum. More importantly, it is an opportunity to get to know local Aboriginal people. Attending regularly will assist in a sharing of knowledge that will be beneficial for both the school and the local community.

There is a wide variety of other community-based groups that educators could also become involved with, for example Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) and Reconciliation Study Circles. Aboriginal community organisations may also have interest groups that hold open meetings. Groups range in focus from community to community, so spend some time talking to your ACLO or AEW to find the most appropriate group with whom you could become involved. Community events and celebrations are also a positive forum in which to make and build contact with the local community.

Other local community organisations also hold regular meetings; however, you should seek permission to attend, clearly indicating your reason for wishing to do so. These organisations include: Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP), Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal medical and legal centres and Aboriginal workers network meetings.

2.5 Localising the curriculum

When teaching Aboriginal studies or perspectives it is important that you do not rely solely on texts which in many cases provide only a national overview of Aboriginal history and culture. Wherever possible, focus your study on local community experiences. Concrete local examples have more meaning for students and at the same time demonstrate the diversity of experiences of Aboriginal people and communities throughout NSW.

There are many local Aboriginal organisations that can assist in a wide variety of curriculum areas such as self-determination and social justice issues. Again, ACLOs and AEWs know about the organisations in your local area.

Many local and city councils have developed directories of Aboriginal organisations in their area, which are a valuable time-saving resource for educators. If there is not already a directory of Aboriginal organisations for your area, you could initiate the development of one. Contact your ACLO or AEW, and get together a group of local people and set aside a day for a workshop. This is a great way to meet a wider circle of community people, and also to develop a resource that will be of use not only to schools but also to the local community.

Consider using this workshop as the basis for establishing a network with other local educators who are teaching Aboriginal studies or developing Aboriginal perspectives for their school's programs. This will help to avoid placing too great a strain on community people and organisations involved in your consultation.

2.6 Links with Aboriginal organisations and government agencies

Every Aboriginal community has a range of service and information organisations managed by members of the community and employing mostly Aboriginal people. Many of these organisations are a rich source of information for educators, and some can provide contacts for speakers, artists and performers who make school visits as part of their work function.

Some government organisations and businesses have Aboriginal liaison officers who could also be invited to the school as guest speakers/artists. Local councils are often a good starting point, as many have initiated local history research projects in conjunction with the local Aboriginal community.

Following is a directory of Aboriginal organisations and government departments who might be able to assist you in gathering information and organising guest speakers/artists. In many cases they will be able to refer you to a local office or organisation closer to your school. For smaller community organisations such as medical and cultural centres, consult your ACLO or the local phone book.

Organisation

Curriculum Link

Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Watch Committee
4 Goulburn Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Ph: 02 9284 9895

Information about the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody and the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)
Level 20, 60 Margaret Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Ph: 02 9256 6100
<http://www.atsic.gov.au>

National organisation responsible for Aboriginal programs and funding.

Aboriginal Studies Association
c/o Professional Teachers Council
PO Box 577
Leichhardt NSW 2040
<http://www.asa.nsw.edu.au>

Membership includes Aboriginal community members, teachers from pre-school to tertiary level, other people working in the field of education.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission – Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
133 Castlereagh Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Ph: 02 9284 9600
<http://www.hreoc.gov.au>

Can provide information on all social justice issues impacting on Aboriginal people, and Native Title issues.

Australians for Native Title & Reconciliation
19a Quirk Street
Rozelle NSW 2039
Ph: 02 9555 6138
<http://www.antar.org.au>

Can provide information on social justice issues, Native Title and Reconciliation. ANTaR are responsible for the Sea of Hands Reconciliation project.

Blackbooks
11 Mansfield Street
Glebe NSW 2037
Ph: 02 9660 2396

Sell a wide range of books by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors. An annotated catalogue is available.

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation
Locked Bag 14
Kingston ACT 2604
Ph: 02 6271 5120
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/orgs/car>

Official organisation of the Reconciliation movement. Their website contains copies of all of their published documents.

Department of Aboriginal Affairs
Level 5, 83 Clarence Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Ph: 02 9290 8700
<http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au>

NSW government department that develops policy in the area of Aboriginal Affairs. Provides information on current Aboriginal issues in NSW.

Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA)
Level 20, 477 Pitt Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Ph: 02 9298 7200
<http://www.detya.gov.au>

Federal government department with offices all over NSW. Many offices have Aboriginal workers who can provide advice on access to funding for schools and students.

Organisation

Curriculum Link

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation
of Languages (FATSIL)
PO Box 1429
Beenleigh QLD 4207
Ph: 07 3807 8933
<http://www.fatsil.org.com>

Publishers of *Voice of the Land*, an informative magazine about current issues in Aboriginal languages.

Koori Mail
PO Box 117
Lismore NSW 2480
Ph: 02 6622 2666
<http://www.koorimail.com>

Subscriptions are available to this Aboriginal newspaper. Focuses on contemporary issues for Aboriginal people across Australia.

Link-Up NSW Aboriginal Corporation
5 Wallis Street (PO Box 93)
Lawson NSW 2783
Ph: 02 4759 1911
<http://www.atsic.gov.au>

Assists members of the Stolen Generation in re-establishing contact with their families. Information about the Stolen Generation and guest speakers.

NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.
(AECG Inc.)
37 Cavendish Street
Stanmore NSW 2048
Ph: 02 9550 5666
<http://www.nswaecg.com.au>

The NSW AECG is the peak consultative body for all matters relating to Aboriginal education. They can assist in contacting your local AECG, recommending resources and community organisations.

NSW Aboriginal Land Council
33 Argyle Street
Parramatta NSW 2150
Ph: 02 9689 4444
<http://www.alc.org.au>

Can provide advice on Land Rights and Native Title, visits to local Aboriginal sites and cultural activities.

NSW Health Department
Aboriginal Health Branch
73 Miller Street
North Sydney NSW 2060
Ph: 02 9391 9502
<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au>

Information on health issues for Aboriginal people, and advice on Otitis Media.

2.7 Further reading on community consultation

For additional reading please check the updated version of this document on the Board of Studies website <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au>

Craven, R (ed) *Teaching Aboriginal Studies*, Allen & Unwin, 1999, ISBN 0 864489 23 5.

Craven, R (ed) *Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Australian Studies*, School of Teacher Education, University of New South Wales, in association with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1996, ISBN 0 733404 34 0.

Brady, W et al *Local Area Studies – A Guide for Teachers of Aboriginal Studies*, The Koori Centre, University of Sydney.

Taylor, P *Telling it like it is – a guide to making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history*, Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1996, ISBN 0 855752 43 2.

Part 3 – Working with Aboriginal People and Communities

3.1 Local Aboriginal communities and curriculum support

Working with an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer or Aboriginal Education Worker will enable you to start planning to involve Aboriginal people in your teaching. These people could assist in your planning as well as speak to your class. They could also suggest some local Aboriginal people who could make valuable contributions to your planning.

When planning teaching programs that include Aboriginal perspectives or Aboriginal studies it is important to invite local Aboriginal people to be part of the planning process. The involvement of Aboriginal people in planning days should become part of the school's overall planning for the year. While they may not be able to attend, it is important to seek their involvement.

Ensure that the people who are invited have experience in the particular area of curriculum being planned, and negotiate the proposed outcomes of the day with them. Always have a clear understanding of the purpose of the consultation and who the people are that need to be consulted.

AEAs or ACLOs can provide advice and active guidance about making contact with a range of appropriate local and regional Aboriginal people and organisations. These include:

- Elders
- Parents
- NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG Inc.)
- Aboriginal Land Councils
- Aboriginal Medical Services
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)
- Aboriginal Health Workers within the Department of Health
- Aboriginal Corporations
- Police Liaison Officers
- Juvenile Justice Centres
- Department of Community Services (DOCS)
- Aboriginal units within universities and TAFE colleges
- Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) education officers
- Aboriginal Liaison Officers in various government departments and other relevant organisations.

Some local government bodies will have a directory of Aboriginal organisations in your area. Within the Department of Education and Training and the Catholic Education systems officers are employed to assist educators in making links with their local Aboriginal community. (See 2.3 *Systemic support networks*, page 10.)

3.2 Working with Aboriginal people in your school

The best way for students to learn about Aboriginal history and culture is to listen to the experiences of Aboriginal people. Wherever possible local Aboriginal people should be invited to share their experiences with the students. Within each community there are Aboriginal people of all ages who have had diverse life experiences. Many of these people are willing to talk about their family, their community and their history, but teachers need to make them feel welcome at the school and respected.

3.2.1 Planning

Talk to your ACLO or AEW about the area of content you are teaching and what you would like your students to learn conceptually and practically by spending time with an Aboriginal person. These officers can assist in finding the most appropriate person to work with you. The ACLO or AEW will then contact the person and talk to them about what your class is doing and tell them to expect a call from you. Your local AECG may also be able to assist you to identify an appropriate guest speaker/artist.

If the school has an AEA ensure they are kept informed of your consultations and are invited to be involved. As community members themselves they can make guests feel more comfortable. Invite the AEA to staff meetings to discuss issues in the school related to the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, and outline to them what will be taught each term. This sharing of information will be beneficial for both teachers and the AEA.

Wherever possible make personal contact with people – writing letters can be too formal and in many cases will not be effective. Talk to the person about the students and what they have been learning about. Consider a personal visit to the person with an Aboriginal liaison person. Ask them if they would be interested in spending some time with the class.

Follow-up contact may be required to arrange a time and place for the lesson. This may be at the school or at another place in the community. If appropriate, discuss payment of the person, recognising that their time is valuable and their expertise warrants payment.

3.2.2 Venue

Before the lesson spend some time with the guest. For example, offer them refreshments, and give them a brief tour of the school. If the school has an AEA invite them to meet the speaker and be part of the lesson. Introduce the speaker to the Principal and other members of staff. This will make the guest feel welcome and it will help familiarise them with the school and its staff.

An informal setting is often more comfortable for people who are unfamiliar with speaking to large groups of students. If possible, move the desks to the side of the room and arrange the chairs in a circle. This type of arrangement assists in facilitating discussion. Ask the speaker if they would like the students to ask questions throughout their talk, or wait until the end. For some people who are nervous it is easier to respond to questions, rather than try to recall all the things they need to speak about.

Venues other than the classroom should also be considered. The school library might be a quiet and comfortable place for such a lesson, or perhaps there is an outdoors area that is appropriate. Many people may be softly spoken, so it is important that the area chosen is quiet and is one where the class will not be disturbed. Ensure all of the students are sitting close enough to the speaker to be able to hear what is being said. Consider taking the students to a venue outside the school where Aboriginal people might feel more comfortable. Many Aboriginal people have had

very poor experiences with the education system and may be reluctant to come to the school, and this should be taken into consideration.

3.2.3 Transport

Make sure the speaker has transport to get to the school and home again. You may need to assist them in arranging appropriate transport, and this may involve meeting the cost of transport.

Some people may feel better in a group. Consider using a seminar approach involving several speakers, or invite the speaker to bring a friend or family member with them as support.

3.3 Preparing the students

Students should be given some knowledge of the content to be covered by the guest speaker. During lead-up lessons, students need to be informed that they will be having a guest speaker and that the person should be treated with courtesy and respect. Students should be helped to recognise that most community people are not trained educators and might not always give a formatted speech directly related to a single topic.

Discuss beforehand the types of questions they would like to ask the speaker. Questions should be related to the topic that has been negotiated with the speaker. A list of questions could then be sent to the speaker, allowing them time to consider what their response might be, and time also to inform the teacher if there are questions they do not wish to answer.

It is important that teachers remember that many people, Aboriginal people included, may have difficulty in discussing traumatic personal experiences with a large group of strangers. Respect their wishes and ensure that students only ask the negotiated questions.

Preparation is fundamental to ensuring a good experience for the speaker and, it is hoped, encouraging them to come to the school again.

3.4 Other considerations

Educators need to be aware of the subtleties of Aboriginal relationships and communication styles. Family and extended family are very important. An event affecting one member of the Aboriginal community may have repercussions for other families or even the community as a whole, and this may be for an extended period of time. This must be accepted and understood, as it might prevent people from being able to attend at the arranged time. Be prepared to be flexible in consulting with Aboriginal people and communities. Remember that consultation will take time, and more than one meeting will be required. This will give everyone involved time to go away and reflect on what has been discussed.

3.5 Sensitive issues in the curriculum

Teachers are strongly encouraged to invite Aboriginal people to work with them as support in the classroom when dealing with Aboriginal spirituality, belief systems and the Dreaming. Only by inviting Aboriginal people to speak about their spirituality can students gain an understanding of what the Dreaming truly means to Aboriginal people today.

It is important to acknowledge the existence of women's business and men's business within Aboriginal communities – particular knowledge is owned only by certain people. It is never appropriate to discuss the nature or content of men's or women's business with students.

When inviting Aboriginal people to speak about potentially sensitive issues in the curriculum – identity, spirituality, the Stolen Generation, Native Title, Land Rights, Aboriginal deaths in custody, racism, Reconciliation, social justice issues – first take time to talk with the speakers about what they are prepared to discuss with the students. For example, some people may be willing to talk about Dreaming stories whereas others may want to speak in more general terms.

An example of a sensitive issue that has been included in the mandatory curriculum is the Stolen Generation. Below is some specific advice on teaching about sensitive issues, using the Stolen Generation as an example. The process underlying this advice could be used as a model for teaching about other sensitive issues.

3.5.1 Teaching about the Stolen Generation

The Stolen Generation is part of the subject matter in the HSIE K–6 syllabus and the History Stage 4–5 syllabus. However, it is vital that this issue is seen as contemporary – one that impacts on the daily lives of many Aboriginal people. Learning about this period and its ongoing effects can be traumatic for Aboriginal students, as in many cases their immediate or extended family will have suffered due to the removal of family members.

Aboriginal community members should be involved from the beginning of the planning phase of these units of work, giving them time to identify appropriate people to share their experiences with the students, and plan for such lessons. Remember that each Aboriginal community and family has been affected in different ways by the issue of child removal.

When inviting people from the local Aboriginal community to speak to students about their experience of being removed from their family, it is vital that both the speaker and students are adequately prepared.

3.5.2 Preparing the speaker

- Discuss the age group of your students with the speaker. This may impact on the way their story is told. Many Aboriginal people suffered traumatic experiences that may not be suitable for younger students to hear.
- Ask the speaker if there are topics they do not wish to discuss. Perhaps a list of questions could be negotiated to ensure that everyone involved feels comfortable.
- Invite the speaker to bring a family member or friend with them as support. This may make it easier for them to speak to a group of students. Often it is best to have several speakers in a panel or seminar approach.
- Make it clear to the speaker that if at some stage they find themselves unable to continue they can end the session. Even people who regularly speak to school groups about their experiences still find it difficult to relive them publicly.

3.5.3 Preparing the students

- Ensure the students have good background knowledge, such as government policies regarding child removal and the contemporary consequences of these policies.
- Consider showing the students excerpts from a video such as *Lousy Little Sixpence* or *Bringing Them Home* to prepare them for the story they are about to hear. This will reinforce the need for students to be sensitive when listening to the speaker.
- Spend time debriefing students after the lesson. Students of all ages will find this a difficult topic to deal with, and may have more questions or issues they would like to discuss.
- Be aware that some students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, may have been removed from their family for a variety of reasons. Teachers should consider the background of these students when teaching about the Stolen Generation.

3.6 Undertaking research

Various syllabuses require or encourage students to undertake class-based or independent research involving Aboriginal people. This may include interviewing local Aboriginal people, collecting oral histories, or a more in-depth study of an issue impacting on Aboriginal people and communities. Teachers may also undertake research as part of their lesson preparation.

The following is some advice on undertaking research required as part of curriculum delivery. This information should be considered a starting point and local Aboriginal communities should be consulted before teachers or students start any research projects.

3.6.1 Intellectual property and copyright

It is important to acknowledge that any information shared by Aboriginal people remains their intellectual property. There may be group ownership of language, local histories, Dreaming stories and knowledge of local sites. When collecting information be sure to consult with a variety of people and ensure that all people and communities involved are acknowledged for their contributions. Such acknowledgment must be negotiated. Some people may not wish to be named as individuals, but all participants should be given this opportunity.

When consulting with Aboriginal people while undertaking research, discuss with them how you plan to use the knowledge they share with you. The way you or the school intend to publish the work may impact on what information is shared. There must be ongoing consultation throughout the process to ensure that the community understands what is happening. An individual may not have permission to give what is actually community knowledge.

3.6.2 Ethical practices when recording people's knowledge or stories

It is important to bear in mind that:

- Individuals or communities can be custodians of knowledge and culture.
- Permission needs to be gained from communities before knowledge is shared.
- When writing up someone's story, always ask the speaker how they want their story written and give the person time to review the draft before the next visit. Some people may wish to talk through the document rather than read it in isolation.
- Invite the person being interviewed to have a family member or friend present during the interview.

- There should be a minimum of two visits to the interviewee – the first one to note the information, and the second to have it verified as being accurately recorded. In some cases further visits will be required.
- Negotiate how the speaker wants the story edited; for example, do they want the notes to be left as spoken, or written with standard spelling and grammar? Who will do the editing – the speaker, the interviewer, or both together? The person being interviewed has the right to ask that material be deleted.
- Make the purpose of any interview very clear so the interviewee knows how their material will be used.
- If an interviewee moves to another location or becomes ill or dies before the project has been completed, permission to continue should be sought from the person's family.
- A copy of the final document should be given to all people involved in interviews and consultation.

3.6.3 Collecting oral histories

Research may require the collection of oral histories from Aboriginal people. Listed below are some strategies to consider when students are collecting oral histories:

- Consider taking a community person, an Aboriginal member of staff or a parent with them on at least the introductory meeting. You may negotiate with them to attend further meetings.
- The venue and dates should be negotiated with the person being interviewed.
- It is important to understand that issues of sensitivity could arise when interviewing community members. Students should be encouraged to discuss the questions they want to ask of community members with their teacher and the Aboriginal Education Assistant before the interview.
- The interviewer should ask open-ended questions that require a detailed response or description; for example, 'What was it like?' or 'Why did you do that?' rather than closed questions that can be answered with a yes or no.
- The interviewee should know the contents of the questions before the interview takes place.
- Seek permission if you want to record the interview on audio or videotape – this should be sought at the time of making initial contact, before the interview takes place.
- If an agreement is made to record an interview for research, make the purpose clear (eg it is necessary so that it can be replayed to record the details, or it is needed as part of the final presentation). It is important to make your intention clear because of issues of ownership and the issues of what will happen to the recording when the person is deceased.
- Introductory protocols are important, so be prepared to spend some time sharing personal background information when you make a visit.
- Having negotiated the list of questions beforehand, be flexible and allow the person to talk on new topics if they so desire during the interview.
- Offer the opportunity for the person to read, view or listen to the material when it is completed and to recommend any necessary changes.
- Before publication of any material it is vital to consider issues of copyright and intellectual property.

Glossary

Aboriginal or
Torres Strait Islander

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is someone who:

- is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent
- identifies himself or herself as an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander, and
- is accepted as such by the Indigenous community in which he or she lives.

Each requirement must be satisfied. This definition rejects the purely racial classification of the past and includes contemporary social and cultural factors. Please note, the term ‘Aboriginal people’ is more appropriate than ‘Aborigines’; ‘part-Aboriginal’ or ‘half-caste’ are offensive terms. The word ‘Aboriginal’ should always be spelt with a capital ‘A’.

Community

Important elements of community are country, family ties and shared experience. Community is about interrelatedness and belonging, and is central to Aboriginality. Aboriginal people may belong to more than one community.

Consultation

An ongoing process involving the establishment of meaningful two-way relationships between Aboriginal people/communities and non-Aboriginal people.

Dreaming

The Dreaming has different meanings for different Aboriginal groups. The Dreaming can be seen as the embodiment of Aboriginal creation which gives meaning to everything; the essence of Aboriginal beliefs about creation and spiritual and physical existence. It establishes the rules governing relationships between Aboriginal people, the land, and all things for Aboriginal peoples. The Dreaming is linked to the past, the present and the future. Where appropriate, refer to Aboriginal names for the Dreaming.

Elders

Elders are custodians of knowledge. They are chosen and accepted by their own communities and are highly respected.

intellectual property

Intellectual property is ‘based on the notion that innovation is the product of the creative, intellectual and applied concepts and ideas of individuals. The state grants specific economic rights to inventive people to own, use and dispose of their creations as a reward for sharing their contributions and, further, to stimulate inventive activities.’ See *Our Culture, Our Future*, AIATSIS, Canberra, 1997, pp 24–25. It is inappropriate to make distinctions between people’s ‘cultural property’ and ‘intellectual property’. The collective cultural heritage of indigenous peoples worldwide constitutes indigenous cultural and intellectual property. ‘Consent procedures may differ from group to group. Furthermore, consent is not permanent and may be revoked.’ (*ibid*, p 25)

land rights	The evolving struggle of Aboriginal and other Indigenous peoples for the absolute legal and moral acknowledgment of prior ownership of their land and recognition of all accompanying rights and obligations which flow from this association. Land Rights (capitalised) refers to the legislation.
native title	Form of land title that recognises Aboriginal people as rightful owners of the land. Native Title (capitalised) refers to the legislation, whereas native title (lower case) refers to the concept.
protocols	Protocols are appropriate ways of behaving, communicating and showing respect for diversity of history and culture, which means acknowledging the knowledge, standing and status of people within the local Aboriginal community and the school community. Protocols will vary between communities, and between people within communities.
Reconciliation	A Commonwealth initiative to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider community and to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, with the target date of 2001. A capitalised 'Reconciliation' is used to refer specifically to the process as it applies to the Indigenous peoples and wider community in Australia.
self-determination	Self-determination involves the effective participation of Aboriginal peoples in all decision-making that affects them.
social justice	A principle that favours measures aimed at addressing inequities. It includes the rights of people to economic and social independence, and empowerment to determine the direction of their own lives and futures. The processes and systems which shape the interaction between people, communities and governments determine the degree of social justice achieved.
Stolen Generation	The term used for the significant number of Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families. While separation of Aboriginal children from their families had taken place from the time of colonisation, the most damaging and extensive removals took place in the twentieth century. The removal of Aboriginal children from their families was government policy in all Australian states. The policy has had an extremely damaging legacy on the self-esteem and identity of those who were subjected to it.