

What is the Cultural Load that First Nation educators refer to?

The demands on teachers are constantly increasing, making it a daily challenge to keep up with compliance and classroom duties. Recent laws now protect workers by allowing them to disconnect after hours, recognising the heavy workload teachers face. But how does this apply to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who have strong ties to their school communities and cultural responsibilities to their families and communities? These educators often take on extra roles beyond their job descriptions due to their unique cultural backgrounds and perspectives.

While non-Aboriginal teachers and principals can leave school and blend into anonymity, this is not the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and support staff. Their role is 24/7, requiring them to be responsive to the needs of the school, staff, and their community at all times. Even after leaving work, they remain active members of their communities, with their responsibilities never truly switched off. The deep connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, their students, and their families foster positive relationships, communication, and trust. The level of trust placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is unique and cannot be replicated by those who are non-Aboriginal. For these educators, it is both a point of pride and a significant responsibility to carry.

Recognising the cultural load

Unfortunately, this level of dedication and commitment often goes unrecognised by those who do not experience it firsthand. It is important to recognise and appreciate the unique cultural load, also known as colonial load, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators carry. Equally it is important to value the added knowledge, the cultural wealth, they bring. This cultural load involves the duty to preserve and share their cultural heritage, language, and traditions with students, colleagues, and the wider community.

Navigating different worlds

The *Make Actions and Words Meet* report¹ presented by the Yalukit Yulendji Committee (the Australian Education Union's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee) in December 2023, highlights the significant challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. The report revealed that 44 percent of respondents felt burdened with the responsibility of addressing Indigenous issues in the workplace and educating their non-Indigenous colleagues on Indigenous culture, despite all staff being provided with professional learning opportunities by their employers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators face numerous challenges within a western education system that often favours quick and simplistic solutions. These educators are frequently seen as representatives of their communities and cultures leading to expectations for them to act as cultural liaisons within their school environments. It is crucial to understand that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are not a homogenous group; their languages, cultures, beliefs, and perspectives are incredibly diverse. Pressuring these educators to speak for all Indigenous peoples is inappropriate, as many may not have the authority or permission to represent their entire community. This can add an extra layer of emotional and mental pressure to their already demanding roles.

We don't see the world as it is ... we see it as we are. Ghandi

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators must navigate the expectations and standards of the mainstream education system while advocating for fair representation, inclusion in the curriculum, and visibility in research agendas. Juggling daily tasks with explaining culture, dispelling stereotypes and misunderstandings including racism and discrimination, addressing historical injustices, and pushing for a more equitable educational landscape becomes exhausting. The constant weight of navigating different worlds adds an additional layer of emotional and mental strain to their already challenging roles. With no recognition of added workload, this can take a toll on health and wellbeing.

Everyone's responsibility

It is vital that schools provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators with support and resources, including time and empathy, to navigate these challenges effectively. It is equally important that all staff members share the responsibility. Placing the burden solely on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to address student behaviour or build relationships with families only adds to the workload while taking away the responsibility from other staff. It becomes a burden when non-Aboriginal staff do not meet their responsibility to First Nation learners. Building relationships with all families is a collective effort that **is** achieved when all staff members prioritise these connections and engage with families in a sincere and authentic manner.

*Authentic human interaction becomes possible when you
lose yourself in a role. Eckhart Tolle*

The shortage of qualified educators means that not every class has a teacher. This highlights the need to diversify the teaching workforce to bring different perspectives and experiences into the classroom for the benefit of all students. By honouring and amplifying the voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, we can progress towards a more inclusive and culturally responsive education system that benefits all students. In doing this, it is essential that schools acknowledge the additional responsibilities shouldered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and to advocate for changes in working conditions that ensure a safe, equitable, and fulfilling work environment for all staff members. Added responsibility added remuneration.

This explainer is a collaboration between the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) and the National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Principal Association (NATSIPA).

ⁱ Australian Education Union. (2023). [Making actions and words meet. Understanding the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators in the workforce](#). Jumbunna Institute.