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Growing Up
Aboriginal
in
Australia

TEACHING NOTES BY DR MARNEE SHAY

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Themes: Aboriginality, identity, kinship, culture, country, Australian history, racism

Year levels: 9–12

Teacher professional development

Synopsis

A rich combination of diverse stories from diverse Aboriginal people, *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia* provides an essential and timely counter-narrative to negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people that continue to pervade Australian society. The text includes stories from men, women, young people through to Elders, who generously share insights into – and experiences of – how they have shaped and navigated their identities as Aboriginal or First Nations peoples of Australia. Stories that highlight Australian government policies, such as assimilation, provide a rare opportunity to understand more deeply the humanity and dignity of Aboriginal people who lived through the decades of that dark time in Australian history. A strong theme throughout the text is stories from mob who are consistently speaking back to stereotyping, racialised constructs, and negative concepts about Aboriginality.

A lot of the time, I have feelings about how my appearance, for some people, excludes me from my Aboriginal identity. It's a battle that I have internally all the time. It's social conditioning. I will never get the inclusion and membership to community simply from my looks. A lot of it is a white thing, sure, but that's also the culture we were brought up in and that takes a lot of mental and emotional undoing.
– Susie Anderson (p.8)

A lot of my non-Indigenous friends seemed to take offence that I was more interested in my Aboriginal heritage than my non-Indigenous one, which I knew little about, and consequently I felt like I was constantly justifying my choices.
– Jared Thomas (p.246)

While we were in town there were special rules we had to abide by. There were separate toilets for us natives and we were not allowed to sit down and eat or drink in the shops. Our people were not allowed in the hotel to buy alcohol unless they had their citizenship certificate. Noongars had to be out of town and back on the Mission Reserve before 6pm, otherwise we could be locked up by the police for the night. There were lots of restrictions, however our fathers and brothers were very hard workers and there was a lot of mutual respect between them and the farmers they worked for in the area.

– Doreen Nelson (p.174)

It's rough to be Aboriginal and proud and stick up for yourself when it means having no friends at all. All white people in my school would laugh at every Abo joke they ever heard while simultaneously being nice to me.

– Zachary Penrith-Puchalski (p.187)

Furthermore, stories of strength, resistance, family, resilience and pride emerge when Aboriginal people describe what Aboriginality means for them outside of the wave of negativity that all Australians are exposed to through the media, education, politics and social ideology.

I learnt what these – my people – have gone through since colonisation, from massacres to removals. I learnt what we're still going through, from institutionalised to casual racism. I learnt that our people are generous and big-hearted, proud and loud, and funny and loving.

– Sharon Kingaby (p.139)

Growing up Aboriginal in Australia has been both a hard and an exciting journey for me, because there are sad (but also great) memories and experiences that will stick with me forever. The fun memories always revolve around my cousins. Going to the park, kicking the footy, eating lollies and laughing all day long, hunting and building cubbyhouses at the beach – happy days and nights I will always remember.

– Frank Szekely (p.230)

Growing up I was always told I was Aboriginal, or Koori, as I prefer; I was always proud of this fact, my country and my people. However, growing up without my father made it difficult to better connect with my culture and people. Often our Koori groups both inside and out of school contained a lot of activities originating from white European culture, or team sports, which I loathed. Having a lighter skin tone, I have been told by others, both Koori and non-Indigenous that I was 'too white to be Aboriginal' and 'that I had more white blood than black blood'. Last I checked my blood

was red just like everybody else's, and I'm not sure when exactly or how these people measured how much 'black' was in my blood.

– Alicia Bates (p.25)

Aboriginal people can't be pigeonholed into stereotypes for convenience. We don't just play sport, and we don't all look the same. We also don't practise culture in the same ways, but we do all share an understanding of what it is to be Aboriginal through unique lived experiences. That is going to be different for every single person.

– Jason Goninan (p.103)

This text provides a strong foundation for teachers and students in Australian schools to challenge negative discourse that remains entrenched politically, ideologically and socially in Australia. Aboriginal people are a minority and make up only approximately 3 per cent of the population. Texts that centre the voices of Aboriginal people are critical resources for schools that want to ensure that Aboriginal peoples, knowledges and perspectives are incorporated in authentic ways into curriculum and into the learning experiences of all Australian students.

Themes

This text provides multiple opportunities to learn about Aboriginal cultures, peoples and knowledges. Critically, all authors are Aboriginal peoples, providing students the opportunity to engage with learning from Aboriginal people directly. Author Keira Jenkins stresses this point:

I grew up in this skin – and I'm still growing up in this skin – I get to decide who I am, even if it takes my whole life to figure it out. So far it's only taken twenty-three years. So I don't care if you're 'black, white or brindle' (ah, that saying; I hear it so much): you don't get to tell me I don't know what it means to be Aboriginal.

– Keira Jenkins (p.128)

Some themes emerge throughout the text, providing teachers with a framework to use the book as a learning resource across a number of key learning areas.

The themes include:

- Australian history: assimilation, blood quantum, colonisation, missions, Stolen Generations
- Activism: political, resistance, social, role models
- Country: connection, significance of place

- Culture: community, language, lore, loss, pride, protocols, resilience, two worlds
- Identity and intersectionality: diversity, queerness, sporting cultures, socioeconomic status
- Kin: care, connectedness, family
- Racism: blood quantum, exclusion (school and social), skin colour, stereotypes

Australian Curriculum

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are currently a cross-curriculum priority area under the Australian national curriculum. The cross-curriculum priority area aims to address two priorities:

- that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are able to see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the curriculum of each of the learning areas, can fully participate in the curriculum and can build their self-esteem
- that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority is designed for all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures. See: <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures/>

The cross-curriculum priority area was framed around three key areas: country/place; peoples; and cultures. The first key area of country and place emphasises the learning about the unique, physical and spiritual connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with country. The second key area of peoples highlights the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through language, ways of being, knowing and doing, using a historical and social lens. The third key area of cultures examines the significance of kinship systems, and contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have made on national and global scales.

This text complements the key areas in the cross-curriculum priority and could span across a number of key learning areas. For Year 10 students there are many ways the text could be used to explore country/place, peoples and cultures through Health and Physical Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, and English curriculum areas. In the senior curriculum, there are multiple ways that the text could be used as a learning resource in the English and Humanities and Social Sciences curriculum areas.

Below is a table mapping the themes from the book and their connection to the cross-curriculum priority areas of country/place, peoples, and cultures.

| Australian curriculum cross-curriculum priority key areas: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures | Themes from <i>Growing up Aboriginal in Australia</i> | Chapter suggestions (please note many chapters could cover all three key areas) | |
|---|--|--|---|
| Country/place | connection to country, significance of place, loss | Evelyn Araluen, Bebe Backhouse, Louise Badayala, Ian Dudley, | Patrick Johnson, Todd Phillips, Frank Szekely |
| Peoples | activism (political and social), assimilation, blood quantum, colonisation, diversity, exclusion (school and social), missions, queerness, racism, resistance, socioeconomic status, sporting cultures, Stolen Generations | Susie and Alice Anderson, Alicia Bates, Don Bemrose, Tony Birch, Katie Bryan, Deborah Cheetham, Natalie Cromb, Karen Davis, Alice Eather, Jason Goninan, Adam Goodes, John Karranjal Hartley, Terri Jenke, Keira Jenkins, Scott Kennedy, Sharon Kingaby, | Ambelin Kwaymullina, Celeste Liddle, Matthew Lillyst, Amy McQuire, Sharon Payne, Zachary Penrith-Puchalski, Carol Petterson, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Marlee Silva, Miranda Tapsell, Jared Thomas, Ceane Towers, Aileen Walsh, Shahni Wellington, Alexis West, Alison Whitaker, Tamika Worrell |
| Cultures | care, community, connectedness, family, language, lore, loss, two worlds, protocols, pride | Norleen Brinkworth, Shannon Foster, Jodi Haines, Jack Latimore, Taryn Little, Melanie Mununggurr-Williams, | Doreen Nelson, William Russell, Liza-Maree Syron, John Williams-Mozley, Tara June Winch |

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Country/Place

Many authors in the text talk about the significance of place and country in sharing their stories. Understanding the deep connection that Aboriginal peoples have with country is the foundation of understanding Aboriginal cultures. Moreover, understanding the long and rich histories Aboriginal peoples have with place and country provides a richer and more in-depth understanding of Australian history for all students in Australian classrooms.

Activity

Using a large map of Aboriginal Australia (interactive or hard copy) developed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, (<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>), ask students to complete the following questions:

1. What is the country on which we are currently located?
2. What do we know about the people and history of this country?
If little is known, why do you think we do not know this information?
3. Are there any significant places in or around the school that you are aware of? (For example, men's places or women's places?)
4. What are the significant things for you when you think about your connection to this place?

Ask students to choose one of the following chapters to focus on: Susie and Alice Anderson, Evelyn Araluen, Bebe Backhouse, Louisa Badayala, Deborah Cheetham, Natalie Cromb, Ian Dudley, Alice Eather, Patrick Johnson
Use the following questions to reflect on that chapter:

1. How did the author describe their connection to country and place?
2. How are connections to place and country associated with understanding Australian history?
3. What are the similarities and differences in how you described the significance of place and how the author described significance of place?
4. In what ways are connection to country (and, in some cases, disconnection from country) unique to the histories and experiences of Aboriginal people in Australia?

Peoples

Aboriginal people are not a homogenous group. There were over 200 diverse Aboriginal nations in Australia prior to colonisation, each with their own distinct languages, lores, lifestyles, kinship systems and ceremonial practices. *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia* highlights the extent of diversity in Aboriginal communities today, emphasising the importance of rejecting stereotyping and generalisations about Aboriginal peoples. Some Aboriginal people have grown up ‘on country’; other families have been impacted by government policies such as ‘assimilation’ where it was legislated practice to remove Aboriginal children from their birth families and country in order to force Aboriginal people to become more ‘white’.

Activity

Choose one of these chapters: Susie and Alice Anderson, Alicia Bates, Don Bemrose, Tony Birch, Katie Bryan, Deborah Cheetham, Natalie Cromb, Karen Davis, Alice Eather, Jason Goninan, Adam Goodes, John Karrantal Hartley, Terri Janke, Keira Jenkins, Scott Kennedy, Sharon Kingaby, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Celeste Liddle, Matthew Lillyst, Amy McQuire, Sharon Payne, Zachary Penrith-Puchalski, Carol Petterson, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Marlee Silva, Miranda Tapsell, Jared Thomas, Ceane G. Towers, Aileen Walsh, Shahni Wellington, Alexis West, Alison Whittaker, Tamika Worrell

In this activity, students will be allocated an author to examine and undertake research to present back to the class.

- Ask students to work in pairs
- Allocate each pair a chapter
- Ask students to create a presentation (poster or PowerPoint) about the chapter that critically examines and includes the following topics:
 - How does the author you examined talk about Aboriginality?
 - In what ways does the author ‘speak back’ to stereotypes about Aboriginal people?
 - What aspects of Australian history (for example, colonisation, assimilation, Stolen Generations) are discussed in the chapter?
 - Include some research about key topics that emerge from your chapter. For example, if blood quantum is mentioned, find out where this term came from and use scholarly sources to explain the term to your peers and how it relates to the experiences of the author in your chapter. If examples of racism are present, do some research into how racism works and the history of racism in relation to Aboriginal people in Australia

Cultures

Aboriginal people continue to make significant contributions nationally and internationally in many areas. Some authors of this text are Aboriginal people who are role models for their people. There are also examples of people who are emerging role models. In recognising the diversity and achievements of Aboriginal people, students will create a profile for either an author from the text or another Aboriginal person, from fields including:

- Academic
- Sports
- Community
- Cultural
- Political
- Arts
- Professional

Chapters: Norleen Brinkworth, Shannon Foster, Jodi Haines, Jack Latimore, Taryn Little, Melanie Mununggurr-Williams, Doreen Nelson, William Russell, Liza-Maree Syron, John Williams-Mozley, Tara June Winch

Each student will make a one-page profile that will then be compiled into a book for their school library. Students can choose to undertake further research on the text's authors and Aboriginal people more broadly who have a public profile where there is publicly available information. They may also choose to ask local people, including elders and other community members who have contributed positively and achieved in their communities. Students will need to ask permission for the images and content to be included for those people who do not have publicly available information.

The one-page profile will include:

- A picture
- Name and country affiliations (if available)
- Short bio
- Summary of their achievements
- Quotes
- Examples of positive messages

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers: Professional Development resource

In addition to this text being used as a curriculum resource for students, the text is also a resource for teachers who are looking for ways to develop their practices in Indigenous education. The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) developed a national set of professional standards for teachers practising in Australian schools. The professional standards include two standards that specifically relate to Indigenous education.

1.4 Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds

2.4 Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

Demonstrate broad knowledge of, understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.

For more information about the AITSL standards go to:
<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>

It has been noted for some time the difficulty teachers have in finding good quality Indigenous education resources to engage with for their professional development. There are stories from authors in this text that frequently speak about their negative experiences with schools, such as feeling disconnected or experiencing racism from teachers and other students (for example, see: Susie and Alice Anderson, Keira Jenkins, Evelyn Araluen, Frank Szekely). As identity-affirming is a crucial but often overlooked aspect of the role teachers have in Indigenous education, this text provides the opportunity to learn from the stories and critically reflect on current professional practices in line with the professional standards.

This powerful quote from Amy McQuire exemplifies this importance:

It's taken a long time to realise that that stranger in the supermarket, like white Australia, knows nothing about us – and that we must hold our children close and ensure they grow up in the strength of who they are, not what they look like.

As teachers are entrusted with Aboriginal young people through their developmental years, this text provides valuable learning opportunities for teachers as well as students.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Racism no way – anti-racism education for Australian schools
<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/>

Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation
<http://rrr.edu.au/>

AustLit and Black Words
www.austlit.edu.au
www.austlit.edu.au/BlackWords



DR MARNEE SHAY is an Aboriginal teacher, university lecturer and researcher. Marnee is an experienced teacher in high school settings, and currently teaches into Indigenous education undergraduate and postgraduate pre-service teaching courses.