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The how and the why of it: what are the essential elements in a quality Indigenous teacher education program in Australia?

Dr Melodie Bat

Abstract

This paper reports on doctoral research undertaken into quality in Indigenous teacher education in Australia, based on the learning journeys of three graduate teachers from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory of Australia. Whilst the published literature often details the challenges and barriers, opportunities and intentions, the graduates speak of self-determination, learning and identity. Their stories provide the deeper story of Indigenous teacher education to which this research is responding—that there is a story of quality and success. We just need to be able to hear it.

The teacher education programs in which the graduates studied have been closely examined in terms of curriculum, as well as enrolments and progressions. The descriptive analysis of this information has told one story about teacher education at Batchelor Institute. This story is one of a strong curriculum, a changing cohort, and significant attrition rates.

The story told by the three graduates gives detailed reflections on their learning journeys. Their story is a reflection on a positive learning experience that strengthened their identities as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and gave them a rich professional qualification. Their story was told through video, and a collaborative approach to research using video was developed through their work.

To be able to understand these stories of teacher education at Batchelor Institute, the literature was critically reviewed with regard to equity and quality in Indigenous teacher education. This review was undertaken through the use of critical hermeneutics.

As the teaching profession and education providers strive to respond to the ever changing nature of the information society as well as to ensure equity in access and participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this research provides a useful example of one institution's contribution to quality.

Keywords: Teacher education, Indigenous teacher education, Quality in teacher education, Cross-cultural research.

About this paper

This paper is intended to generate discussion and action in the search for a more equitable approach in Indigenous teacher education. As Australia enters into a new era of regulation within the teaching sector, it is the teacher education programs' turn to be scrutinised. However, 'there is not even agreement on what quality in teacher education means' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007, p. 2). In this paper, what constitutes a quality Indigenous teacher education program is considered, not from a neutral, positivist, objective position, but rather from a critical approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Held, 1980; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), where the work is located 'in a transformative praxis that leads to the alleviation of suffering and the overcoming of oppression' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 321).

Part of this transformation is related to increasing the quantity of teachers, through considering access and participation rates. These rates within Australia and within the Northern Territory, where this research was conducted, illustrate significant under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within teacher education programs and within the teaching workforce. The other contributing factor in the transformation of teacher education is the quality of the preparation that the teacher receives (OECD, 2005).

About this research

The specific context for this research is Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory of Australia. Batchelor Institute has for many years been Australia's sole national provider for higher education and training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, 2007b).

The central task of the Institute is to provide tertiary education and training that engages students in the development of appropriate responses to issues of cultural survival, maintenance, renewal and transformation within national and international social, political and economic contexts.

(Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, 2007b, p. 8)

There are two operating principles that guide Batchelor Institute, those of self-determination and both-ways (Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, 2007b). Both-ways is an approach to teaching and learning that builds on the knowledge, language, culture and experiences of the students to undertake a collaborative learning journey that strengthens students' identity as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Ober & Bat, 2007). Both of these principles are framed by the organisation's vision.

Batchelor Institute's vision

A unique place of knowledge and skills, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians can undertake journeys of learning for empowerment and advancement while strengthening identity.

(Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, 2007a, p. 2)

The research which informs this paper was conducted from within this organisation and within these two principles of operation and considered the two institute's two teaching degrees—the Bachelor of Education (Primary) and the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) for the period 2002-2006. The question posed in that doctoral research was:

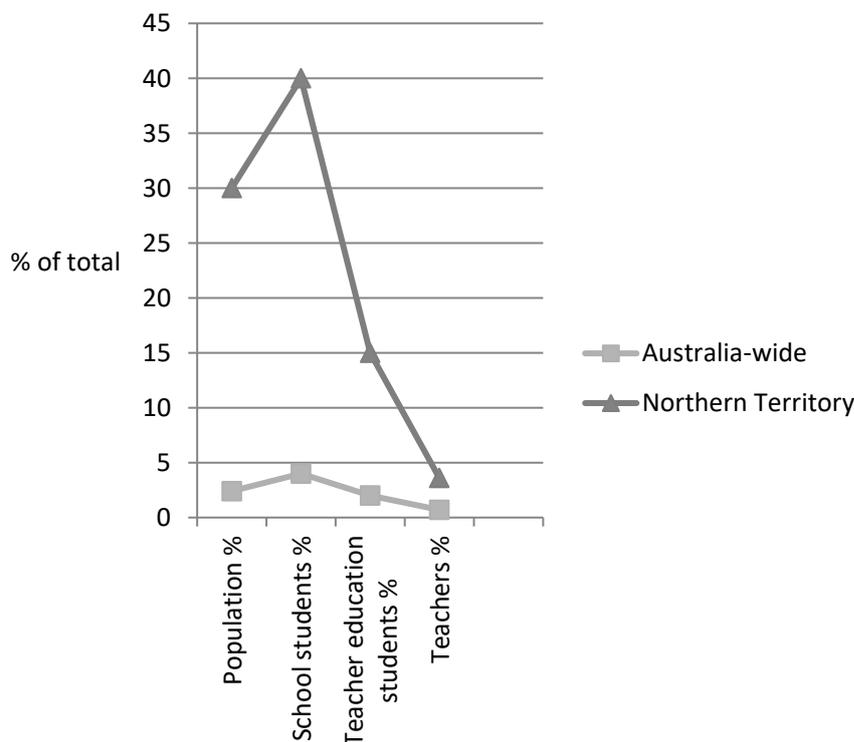
Why Batchelor? What is it about the teacher education degree programs at Batchelor Institute that can inform knowledge on what quality teacher education programs are for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?
(Bat, 2010, p. 148)

In order to answer this question, a review of the literature was undertaken and then data collected from within Batchelor’s programs. The literature review took the form of a critical hermeneutic analysis of a wide range of literature. In such an approach, the literature is searched for understanding, not only meaning, and is interpreted in the context in which it has been generated as well as through the interpreter’s own experiences and understandings (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This review generated statements around what constitutes quality in Indigenous teacher education programs. Data collected from Batchelor’s Indigenous teacher education programs and from reflections of three graduates was then used to either confirm or refute these generalisations.

Searching for equity through access and participation rates

There is an acknowledgement of the low access and participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the teaching workforce and higher education programs in Australia (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003). This can be illustrated graphically, below in Figure 1, where the rates for both Australia and the Northern Territory are presented.

Figure 1: Access and participation rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher education students and teachers in Australia and the Northern Territory



(Note that Figure 1 has been compiled from two sources of data: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007, p. 39; and: Senator Allison, 2008, p. 636. The full explanation for the need to amend the data can be found in the endnote¹.)

The data in Figure 1 illustrate that nationally, there is almost parity between the percentage of initial teacher education students with the population for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples. The national issue does not at first glance appear to be higher education participation, but rather one of retention. In the Northern Territory, however, there is a marked difference between the population percentage and that of teacher education students. In the Northern Territory, 30% of the population identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, yet only 15% of the teacher education student population identify thus. Clearly, there is a need to ensure a supported enrolment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in teacher education programs both nationally and within the Northern Territory. One response to support students to access and to succeed within teacher education programs is to address issues at an institution-wide level.

Supporting equity at an institution level

The review of the literature suggests a number of factors that can positively impact on access and participation. An institution that is running a quality Indigenous teacher education program has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in positions relating to governance, leadership and management and employs and trains skilled staff to be culturally competent (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Gunstone, 2008; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006, 2007a; Ottmann, 2005; United Nations, 2008). These approaches provide the quality staff needed to implement the programs (Bradley et al., 2008).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are a highly visible and valued part of the institution (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Bradley et al., 2008; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006; Nakata, 2007) and the institution provides a culturally safe place for students to undertake their studies (Bin-Sallik, 2003; United Nations, 2008; White, 2002). The institution also ensures that students receive academic support, financial support including and personal support through counselling and advisory services (Bradley et al., 2008; Nakata, Nakata, & Chin, 2008; United Nations, 1948).

The institution, then, needs to ensure that these elements are in place. By doing so, the educational institution will then be in a position to be able to support the achievement of the equitable indicator of high pass and retention rates that are the same for Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander as for other students (EFA Global Monitoring, 2009a, 2009b; Gunstone, 2008; OECD, 2007; Usher, 2009).

Supporting equity through a quality Indigenous teacher education program

On a program level, some indicators of quality are determined by professional authorities, through program accreditation and graduate standards (Bradley et al., 2008; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, 2008; Teaching Australia, 2008). Alternative entry pathways and equitable entry selection processes that ensure suitability to teach all help to engender quality (Bradley et al., 2008; Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, & Elliott, 2004; Ramsey, 2000).

The exemplary Indigenous teacher education program has self-determination and emancipation as key outcomes (Brady, 1997; Edwards & Hewitson, 2008; Gunstone, 2008; Sonn, Bishop, & Humphries, 2000) and has an aim of increasing social capital through health, civil and social outcomes (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006). Such a program is distinctly different from other degrees (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006; Nakata, 2004) and caters to a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Bradley et al., 2008; Gunstone, 2008; Herbert, 2003). The program prepares graduate teachers for some of the realities of teaching, including the racism

that is inherent within classrooms, schools and school communities, what has been labelled 'the impenetrable whiteness' of schools (Reid et al., 2004, p. 304).

The program must be designed to be equitable in its delivery rather than focusing solely on the graduate outcomes (Gunstone, 2008; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006; Nakata et al., 2008; Universities Australia, 2008). This can be achieved through connecting in with the community at all levels of development and delivery (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2007a; OECD, 2007; WINHEC Working Party on Accreditation, 2006) and through designing a curriculum that has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and culture at its core (Battiste, 2004; Bradley et al., 2008; Ford, 2005, 2006; Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2007b) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as part of the instruction (Beaulieu, Figueira, & Viri, 2005; Herbert, 2006). All teacher education programs require an emphasis on pedagogy, child learning and development, curriculum planning and skills for reflection on practice (Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, et al., 2004; Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee, 2005). The development of subject matter knowledge is important as the development of the teacher's knowledge and skills in literacy, numeracy, assessment, classroom management, behaviour management and the ability to cater for the diversity within the classroom as well as for meeting the special needs of children (Department of Education Science and Training, 2002, 2005; Ingvarson, Beavis, & Kleinhenz, 2004; Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, et al., 2004; Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee, 2005). Teachers have high personal literacy and numeracy levels and must also be competent users of information and communication technologies, utilising these within their teaching (Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee, 2005).

A quality undergraduate teacher education program has professional placements that total a minimum of 80 days (Commonwealth of Australia Higher Education Support Act, 2006; Department of Education Science and Training, 2005) and these professional placements are each of a suitable length and supported through appropriate resourcing (Halsey, 2005; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2005; Ramsey, 2000). Professional placements support the strengthening of the connections between theory and practice (Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, et al., 2004; Victorian Parliament Education and Training Committee, 2005). It supports professional placements through mentoring from lecturers and school staff and brings the teaching profession into program delivery (Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, et al., 2004; Ramsey, 2000). The lecturers and tutors are all experienced and successful classroom practitioners and the teaching profession is visible in the delivery of the program, a program which offers flexible study options for students (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007).

Quality teacher education programs deliver the program using the pedagogical practices which they hope to develop within the practice of preservice teachers (Ingvarson, Beavis, Danielson, Ellis, & Elliott, 2005). Extending this to teacher education programs preparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, then, the program embeds the pedagogical practices that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers have identified as successful pedagogy (Biosocial Studies D-BATE students, 1988; Blitner et al., 2000). A quality Indigenous teacher education program, then, is delivered through a learner-centred approach (AhChee, 1991; Lovat & Mackenzie, 2003; White, 2002) and uses hands-on, discovery learning through collaborative group work (House of Representatives Standing Committee on

Education and Vocational Training, 2007). In a quality Indigenous teacher education program the lecturers are also learning and the students are also teaching (Ober & Bat, 2007).

A quality Indigenous student experience

The students in a quality Indigenous teacher education program feel that they belong (Herbert, 2002b; Wallace, 2008). They form positive relationships and are lifelong learners (Herbert, 2005). The students are self-directed learners and form learning communities (OECD, 2005). Such students work in teams, showing initiative and enterprise, and have good planning and organising skills (Cutler, 2008). Strong problem solving skills are complemented by their communication skills. These students are strong learners, competent and confident with information technology, integrating these skills across knowledge and curriculum areas (Burnett, 2008; Ingvarson, Beavis, Kleinhenz, et al., 2004). Their personal English literacy and numeracy skills are well developed (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007).

Students within a quality Indigenous teacher education program see themselves as professionals, well able to meet the professional standards for their jurisdiction (Ramsey, 2000). These bi-culturally competent professionals make a contribution to the cultural and intellectual life in Australia as well as to community capacity building, with the goal of social, cultural and economic development of the whole Indigenous community (Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, 2006, 2007a).

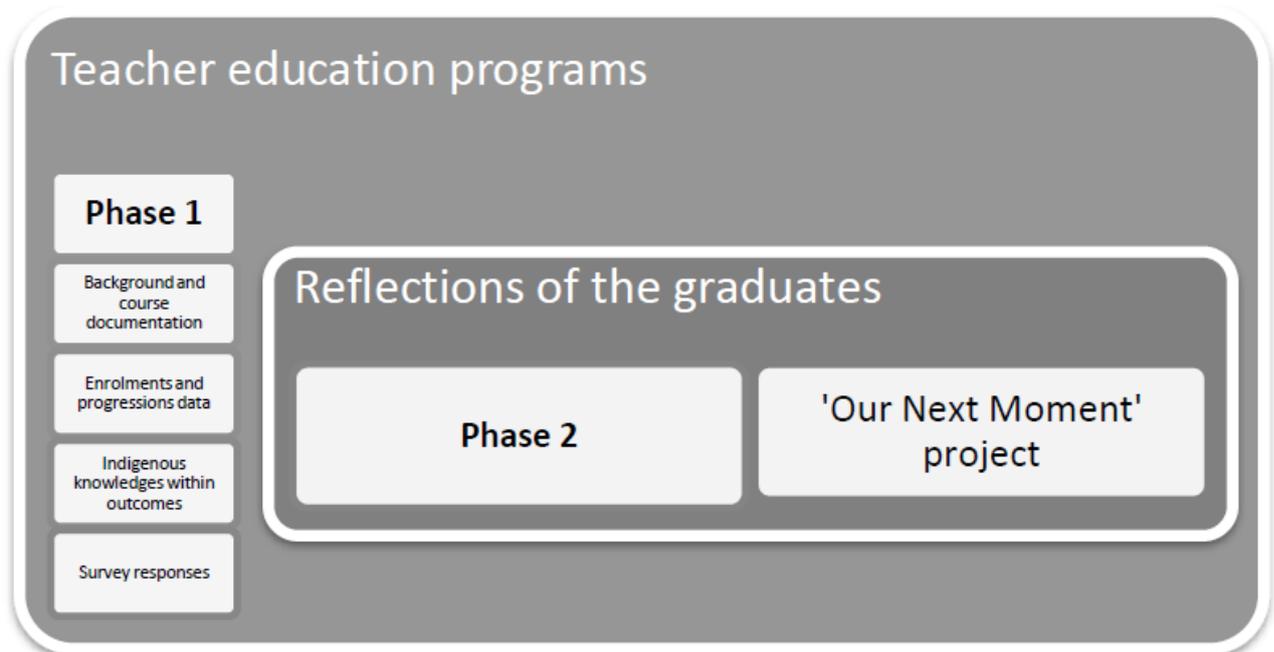
As beginning teachers, graduates of a quality Indigenous teacher education program are 'teacher ready' and are highly competent classroom practitioners, able to teach in a variety of contexts (Herbert, 2002a; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Ramsey, 2000). They know their students and how their students learn and how to teach them (Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, 2006). They have a rapport with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students and can use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs Taskforce on Indigenous Education, 2001). Such teachers know the content they teach and are reflective practitioners. They can plan, program, assess and report for effective learning. They are futures-oriented and can create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments, taking responsibility for managing and monitoring student learning (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2005; Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2005).

These indicators of quality have been taken from a wide range of literature and used to build the field surrounding the consideration of quality in an Indigenous teacher education program. In order to either confirm or refute these understandings, further research was undertaken in the specific context of Batchelor Institute's teacher education programs.

Data gathered from Batchelor's Indigenous teacher education programs

Batchelor's story was gathered from two primary sources—written information about the teacher education programs, including surveys; and the reflections of three graduate teachers in the form of a short video. The data and its analysis can be presented as shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: the two phases of data



(Bat, 2010, p 176)

In the first phase of the methodology, the information surrounding the teacher education programs from Batchelor Institute was collected and analysed. This information included the background information and the course documentation. This was followed by the descriptive statistical analysis of the collected enrolments and progressions data from the two teacher education programs for the period 2002–2006, including an analysis for the presence of Indigenous knowledges at outcome level. This was followed by the analysis of written survey responses that had been sent to all students, staff and schools. The data analysis from this phase generated the first area of results of the research.

In the second phase of the methodology, three graduates created a short, reflective video of their learning journeys with Batchelor in a smaller project titled 'Our next moment'. This project itself generated some new ways of undertaking collaborative action research (Bat, Lammon, Bennell & Zaro, 2009). The transcript of the movie provided the data for analysis against the indicators of quality.

In Phase 1, the data clearly illustrates that the education cohort at Batchelor Institute for the period 2002–2006 shows a significant decrease in overall enrolments and a specific and marked decrease in the level of enrolments and progression of students from the remote communities of the Northern Territory. There is a corresponding relative and actual increase in the number of enrolments from interstate students. There is an actual decrease but a relative increase in the proportion of enrolments from the urban centres of the Northern Territory. Clearly, interstate enrolments are a growth area for Batchelor Institute. What is also clear is that a large proportion of the students who did not maintain their enrolment in the teacher education program during the period 2002–2006 were from the remote communities of the Northern Territory.

What can also be seen from the Batchelor Institute course documentation is the continued focus on both-ways and self-determination as key course outcomes, as well as the inclusion

of teaching strategies and approaches commensurate with earlier approaches. The curriculum changed in response to changes in professional requirements of the time and the introduction of graduate attributes, but retained the key elements present in earlier curricula at times of greater access and participation. What did change was the delivery mode, with a shift from an approach with more community-based education to one of almost entire campus-based delivery.

The Phase 2 data, taken from the reflections of three of the graduates from these programs, gives another story. In the video created by the graduates, there is a clear message of the importance of relationships in learning. The findings can be summarised succinctly as...it wasn't so much the *what*, but the *why* and the *how* of the teacher education program that was the most important.

The analysis of the graduates' stories confirmed that Batchelor Institute's approach, to place self-determination as the foundation of all programs, was an essential component to their successful study, completion and transition to teaching. A quality Indigenous teacher education program takes a stance to make a real change in the world. This is the *why* of the program.

The learning in such a program is based on the relationships of all those teaching, learning and working within the program, including students, staff, lecturers, families and communities. The learning journey is one where everyone is learning and everyone is teaching. The students in a quality Indigenous teacher education program are learning to teach using the very methods and approaches that they will apply in the classroom as their pedagogy. Relationships are fundamental in Indigenous education, strengthening identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the learning context. This, then, is the *how* of the program.

Where relationships are impacted, then there is a corresponding impact on the program. This insight reconciles the drop in enrolments from the remote communities of the Northern Territory with the positive story from the graduates. Relationships must include relationships to country, as well as to people. Where students have strong connections to country this aspect of their identity and their relationships must be included within the learning context for real relationships and learning to occur. Where students are required to leave country for long periods of time, or where the learning does not include their relationships and knowledges from country, the learning will be impacted.

This reciprocal approach supports the sharing of knowledges across the different epistemes present in the learning context. These knowledges are both embedded through curriculum design but are, perhaps more importantly, brought to the learning by the students themselves and form part of the relationship-based learning experience. As one graduate shared:

We didn't get taught Indigenous Knowledges, it was a by-product of the diverse group of students that we had. So the mainstream theories that we were taught, each student brought with them their background and culture and we applied this knowledge to the theories that were being taught.
(Annabella¹)

¹ Not her real name. Annabella is one of the three graduate teachers who shared their deep learning for this work.

Findings

The two data sets were then applied to the indicators of quality in order to generate the findings of the research. For the purposes of this paper, the relevant findings from this research can be presented as follows:

A quality Indigenous teacher education program has equity of inputs as well as outputs (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs Taskforce on Indigenous Education, 2001).

- a) An equity of inputs is evident when:
 - i. Self-determination is a key purpose of the program
 - ii. Indigenous knowledges and cultures are embedded throughout the program
 - iii. Delivery of the program strengthens identity through relationship-based learning.
- b) An equity of outputs is evident when:
 - i. Graduates attain professional standards
 - ii. Graduation rates are commensurate with all other students
 - iii. Social capital is created through community capacity building.

(Bat, 2010, pp.339-340)

Implications for Indigenous teacher education

Clearly, there is a disparity in Australia with regards to the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in teacher education programs and in the teaching workforce (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003). To help with enrolment and retention in the teacher education programs, a quality program can be designed and delivered. Such a program has self-determination at the foundation, embeds Indigenous knowledges in content and delivery and makes use of relationship-based learning in its delivery. This approach of focusing on the 'how' and 'why' of teacher education will not only help retain students and support them to achieve the graduate standards for their profession, but will make a real contribution to effecting change. The question becomes then, not, "do we know *what* a quality Indigenous teacher program must have?", but rather, "do we know *how* and *why* to make a quality Indigenous teacher program?"

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ⁱ Figure 1 data discussion:

The report, 'Top of the Class' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007) includes the statement that:

In 2004, approximately 15% of initial teacher education students in the Northern Territory were Indigenous,²⁰ and 15% of teachers in the Northern Territory were Indigenous.²¹
(House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007, p. 39)

(Please note that the footnotes are included as part of the original text.)

The footnote directs the reader to '21 Department of Education, Science and Training – IESIP performance reports, 2003 and 2004'. However, these reports are difficult to source. In particular, the number of Indigenous teachers in the Northern Territory, reported to be fifteen per cent, seems to be overstated. Further research reveals the following quote taken from the Australian Parliamentary debates of 2008, spoken by Senator Allison, the leader of the Australian Democrats:

There are very few Indigenous teachers in Australia. Even in the Northern Territory, where roughly 30 per cent of the population is Indigenous, only 3.6 per cent of the registered teachers identify as of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. And many of these teachers have not completed the normal four-year qualification for teaching.

(Senator Allison, 2008, p. 636)

This information would indicate that perhaps the IESIP reports of 2003/4 which provided the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the Northern Territory schools included the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Assistant Teachers employed in the schools, thus inflating the figures. This incorrect reporting is supported by the annual report of the Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory for 2005:

Of the 3992 registered teachers, 156 identified themselves as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

(Teacher Registration Board of the Northern Territory, 2005, p. 13)

This serves to highlight the absolute need for verifiable and national data in this area.