



**KRISTY PUGLIANO** reflects upon her own experiences leading Aboriginal Education and shares her story and some resources and key relationships teachers can begin with...

*My name is Kristy Pugliano and I am an Aboriginal teacher in South West Sydney from Kamilaroi Country (around Singleton and the Hunter Valley area). My grandmother and mother are of Aboriginal heritage from the Quirrindi area and my father was born in Calabria, Italy. I am proud of where I come from and my heritage and ancestry drives my teaching practice every day.*

Teaching Aboriginal students is one of the most rewarding opportunities for teachers in our public school system. Leading Aboriginal Education in your school is amongst the most significant and important responsibilities or portfolios you can take on in your teaching career.

To begin, I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Elders both past, present and future for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hope of Aboriginal Australia. We must always remember that under the concrete and asphalt of our schools this land is and always will be traditional Aboriginal land.

Teachers in Public Education seek to work in a school which values Aboriginal culture and celebrates and supports Aboriginal students, families and communities. A challenge that can arise, especially if you initially have little knowledge, understanding or experience of Aboriginal culture and matters, is how to get started and how to make a difference in the lives of the Aboriginal students in your school. Some common questions include:

- How do we build community partnerships?
- How do we instil ideas of equality and aspirational goals for Aboriginal students in our school?
- How do we avoid a shallow 'tick-a-box' approach and instead, actually do real and meaningful work?
- And importantly, how do we educate non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal peoples and issues?

## ***Family and relationships***

It is important to understand that Aboriginal culture is strongly unified by family and relationships. Before embarking on your Aboriginal Education journey you must consider relationships, as this is the key to success.



The importance of making a connection and valuing culture and relationships cannot be understated.

To gain a better understanding of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' kinship and connections work, it is strongly advised you have a look at Sydney University's [Kinship Module Teaching and Learning Framework](#). This framework can better inform your relationships with Aboriginal students and families, as it aims to improve cultural awareness and interactions. In relation to the modules, Lynette Riley, a project leader, explains,

*In a school situation where a teacher is talking to the parents, they want a decision straight away; it's not going to work for Aboriginal people. They actually need time to go back and talk to [extended family with Kinship connections and obligations] and explain what the issues are and then come to a group consensus as to the best way forward. If you don't build into the consultation process strategies that allow Aboriginal people to take stock of the Kinship issues then it means that you're putting them in jeopardy of breaking ties and creating barriers within their wider family network.*

Sharing quality resources and insights such as the Kinship Module Teaching and Learning Framework with colleagues can provide a valuable starting point for real cultural change in your school.

### **Getting organised**

The first thing teachers should do is either join their school's Aboriginal Education Team or establish one. First steps include finding out about the skills and strengths of people in the school and creating a team of like-minded and passionate teachers and support staff.

From there, the team can have regular meetings and develop a school policy and may also consider preparing an Aboriginal Education three-year plan, supporting the needs of the school's Aboriginal students and families.

Including Aboriginal people, students and families in your planning is a key to success. In the early days, it is crucial to seek and listen to feedback about what students want and need.

I found that when starting out, most students knew they had Aboriginal heritage but some students did not know where it came from or anything about their mob. Some good ways to make connections include holding an 'Eat and Greet', and inviting the parents, grandparents and students into your school to test the waters and see how many families attend.

Food is key! Engaging some Aboriginal families with the school setting can be challenging, and a BBQ or a breakfast club can be an effective way to create a welcoming space that is family friendly and where families feel comfortable to have a yarn.



## ***Be selective with opportunities and events***

Some good starting points for all schools include flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags alongside the Australian flag and including Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country in school ceremonies and events.

Beyond these initial steps, it is imperative that when leading Aboriginal Education you do not attempt to conquer every opportunity and every event and excursion that comes your way. There are copious events and excursions available to young Aboriginal students and it can be best to start small, perhaps with a small community event, and prioritise getting to know your students and developing a good rapport and strong relationships with the community.

## ***Local networks and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG)***

Accessing help and seeing what other schools in your local area do, as well as establishing local networks, are imperative to your success. You should contact your local [Aboriginal Education Consultative Group](#) (AECG) for support and to meet people who have positive goals and aspirations just like you. You can pick up lots of tips and tricks from these meetings that happen all over New South Wales. The AECG's website outlines its purpose and some key features are included below:

*The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. is a non for profit Aboriginal organisation that provides advice on all matters relevant to education and training with the mandate that this advice represents the Aboriginal community viewpoint.*

*The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. promotes respect, empowerment and self-determination and believes the process of collaborative consultation is integral to equal partnership and is fundamental to the achievement of equality.*

*The NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. advocates cultural affirmation, integrity and the pursuit of equality to ensure that the unique and diverse identity of Aboriginal students is recognised and valued.*

## ***School policies, plans and goals***

When establishing your goals and three-year Aboriginal Education Plan as a committee, you should embed everything you do into the School Plan with a view to ensuring that this work, over the course of the three years, becomes part of the whole school's priorities.



You will also need to consider the school budget allocation, and ensuring all funding is being spent correctly and equitably towards opportunities to support student learning and well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Personalised Learning Plans (PLP) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are a highly valued and beneficial aspect of Aboriginal Education. Personalised Learning Pathways are an active process developed in consultation with the student, parents/carers and teachers, to identify, organise and apply personal approaches to learning and engagement. It is this personal connection and interaction with families that allows the school and teachers to gain insight into factors that may be hindering or impacting Aboriginal student success.

It is recommended that all Aboriginal students have a PLP that is tailored to the student and is regularly reviewed and updated. There is no statewide Personalised Learning Pathway template, and it is recommended that schools and communities develop a PLP template together to suit their local needs.

A great idea is to get to know your local AECG and when it is your first time working with PLPs it is nice to have some guidance. If you have already established a relationship with families via community events, BBQ's, morning teas and 'Eat & Greets' you will find these planning meetings easier to establish, as families will be more comfortable in the school environment.

If families don't want to come into the school, then try meeting them at a local café or park, and hold the meeting for the Personalised Learning Pathways away from school grounds. It is important for schools to be flexible and accommodating. More information from the Department can be found in their [Personalised Learning Pathways Guidelines](#).

## ***Additional support and resources***

A very exciting opportunity which aims at engaging Aboriginal communities and, in particular, celebrating student success is the [MGoals website](#). The MGoals program fosters partnership, builds connections and promotes the brilliant work being done by community and schools in support of Aboriginal culture and Education.

This website has two functions: firstly, it is a website-building project to encourage schools to collaborate with their local Aboriginal community in building a local community website resource; secondly, it also performs as an online goal-setting program. It is a place for students to interact with teachers, parents and mentors to set goals for living and learning.

The goal-setting program helps students to build their knowledge through aspiring towards and achieving their goals. This site can greatly help students, teachers and parents to develop Personalised Learning Pathways if they choose to access this platform.



If you also have stories to tell within your community, a great way to document them is through this website.

Below are some further helpful resources and links to support you in your journey.

NSWTF, *Aboriginal Education: A 25 Year Approach*

<https://www.nswtf.org.au/pages/aboriginal-education-25-year-approach-way-forward.html>

*One Stop Shop for Aboriginal Education*

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/aec>

*NSW Department's Policy*

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/aboriginal-education-and-training-policy>

*Personalised Learning Pathways*

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/aec/media/documents/PersonalisedLearningPathways16.pdf>

*Aboriginal Education in Public Schools*

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/aec/aboriginal-education-in-nsw-public-schools#Key0>

*NAIDOC*

<http://www.naidoc.org.au/2017-national-naidoc-theme>

*Aboriginal dancers and performers*

<https://koomurri.com.au/>

Whether you want to change the whole school culture in terms of Aboriginal Education or want to engage Aboriginal students in your classroom, all of it counts and it all makes a difference.

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