



# Aboriginal people are looking for a handup not a handout. Basically an Aussie Fair Go

---

Without a doubt Aboriginal people have the worst outcomes in Education, Health, Housing and all-round quality of life. Which begs the question why is it so after 255 years of failed government policies not much has changed?

The key to overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage is education. Better education leads to better careers, better pay, health housing and all-round quality of life.

The only way to achieve this is through relationship, relationships, relationships. We don't want others walking in front showing the way. We want all other Australians walking beside us finding the way together.

As an Aboriginal person who has lived through the worst of what the education has dealt out to Aboriginal people I am cynical to say the least when it comes to all education systems. The fact that we are still way below all other students on every educational indicator and in some cases going backwards at times makes me despair.

Many many years of ill-conceived short term band aid government policies including the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education plan makes me wonder if things will ever change. When conceiving these plans Government often consults us, problem is they listen without hearing and do what they were going to do anyway. Most of these plans are knee jerk reactions to what is the current flavour of the month Aboriginal "problem" that the media is focusing on. eg the Intervention. I am pleased to say however that there is a little light at the end of the tunnel.

A while back I was asked to run the six-week mandatory Aboriginal component of the teacher's course at a Sydney University. I agreed because I have always been terrified

of public speaking, and I wanted to address that weakness. It was also the chance to influence 150 blank slates (teachers) before they hit classrooms across NSW.

When I walked into that auditorium it was an Aboriginal person's worst nightmare, to be locked in a room with 150 teachers staring at you. A million thoughts run through your mind like, I will bet there are a few because of my appearance will be questioning whether I am a "real" Aboriginal, being an IT dinosaur what am I going to do for two hours if the IT doesn't work, have I got enough material for 2 hours, are there a few racists in the audience who are going to give me hard time. The list was endless.

To run this course I had to put together a course outline in a very short space of time. Thanks heavens for my academic brother Tony McArthur who has an academic opinion on everything. The original outline was basically based on WA which wasn't going to teach the teachers much about Aboriginal students in Western Sydney classrooms.

To be quite truthful until I started building power points I had absolutely no idea what I was going to say. So I sat down and used my Aboriginal learning style (Big picture learning). I first spent a lot of time thinking about exactly what result I wanted.



**THE NEXT  
GENERATION:  
STRENGTH,  
VISION &  
LEGACY**  
6-13 JULY 2025

Aboriginal people in the main are big picture learners because it gives us relevance. Western education is about giving you little bits of the puzzle at a time building up to the final product. Really it isn't till the end that you get any relevance to all that work you are doing. We like to see the whole thing up front so we know what we are aiming at. And hey we can show you a shorter way to get there. This quote probably sums it up best

"To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you are going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction".

What I did was break down what I know from experience they needed to know to get the best results for Aboriginal students in about 6 components covering things like:

- What does an Aboriginal person look like?
- The extended family is central to the life of Aboriginal children.
- Building relationships with Aboriginal students and community
- Role of Aboriginal Education Workers
- To be a quality teacher you have to first be a quality person
- Importance of Sorry business protocols
- Shame
- Racism and its effects
- Aboriginal learning styles etc

Over the course of the six weeks all of these teachers gained a much better hands on experience of what they needed to do and how to do it. I think many of them will now advocate for Aboriginal students, because they want to not because they have to.

The following comments from different graduating teachers are evidence of that:

- As a teacher it is crucial to work closely with AEWs to try your best to enable and promote the learning of Aboriginal students in the classroom.

•Other strategies include encouraging parents and elders of the community to become involved in the day to day aspects of their children's learning, ie participation in school events ( and being invited to all events not just Aboriginal ones ), incorporating AEWs into classroom activities and the planning of lessons so they can help teachers incorporate Aboriginal perspectives. AEWs are also positive role models for students.

•The teacher should not rely on the AEW ( Aboriginal Education Worker ) for discipline and welfare work.

•One of the most important contributions that a teacher can make to Indigenous education is to learn from and get to know Indigenous people.

•Teachers are not holders of all knowledge. Knowledge of student's cultures and heritage are best known by the students themselves.

•All Aboriginal students are different. Teachers have a professional responsibility to develop a repertoire of teaching strategies in order to engage and empower Aboriginal students within a diversity of learning environments.

•It is imperative for teachers to recognise the cultural backgrounds of each child in their classroom as this may have an effect on how they learn. In the case of Indigenous students, being aware of their long standing history and the struggles that they face, the fact they were forced to assimilate into European culture can have a profound effect on how a teacher approaches the education of the Indigenous students in their classroom .

•Communication with Indigenous parents is crucial; building a relationship will allow starting on a positive note with their students.

•There is a lot that needs to be done in order to improve Indigenous education outcomes.

The mere creation of various policies is not enough to reform Indigenous education. It is the implementation at a school level that needs to occur.

•Teachers who are very early in their careers understand the need for inclusive practices in the communities but do not have the skills to enact their preferred strategies.

•The attitudes, thoughts of the classroom teacher cannot be hidden from the class, therefore what the teacher thinks and believes really matters.

•When working with Indigenous students, the quality of the relationships within the classroom is just as important as the quality of the teaching.

•By making time each day for reading and writing and not correcting grammar, students are encouraged to try without fear of failure. By eliminating the fear of failure and encouraging the experience of learning on a community scale, shame can be eliminated.

•The education of Indigenous students has often suffered from ad hoc National strategies, that have thus far proved to be poorly conceived, crisis driven and lacking in strategic direction

•Aboriginal children are encouraged to learn lessons through stories and experience rather than rules. These ideas are then crushed in the school environment where they are required to conform, listen and obey.

•It is also important to promote cultural respect and include local Aboriginal communities in the life of the school, not just for media events.

•Teachers can nurture success by ensuring students can and do succeed and make them aware of their achievements. Success should occur every day in some small way to boost confidence and encourage learning.

•Teachers must also branch out into the community, to assist and be seen as a positive figure rather than a superior one

•Teachers need to dispel the myth that it "It's not cool to be smart" and lift children's expectations

•Dispel Fear of failure by starting to build little successes through scaffolding.

•In order to cater for Indigenous parents' teachers should not be pushy and listen to what the parents are saying, and don't put forward an opinion until you understand what the parent is saying

•Speak to parents about their child by highlighting the positives as well as sending home positive notes about their child and most importantly be yourself

•An attitude change within all schools to has to occur for any real difference to occur for Indigenous students.

•AEWs are a valuable and vital resource for students and schools. Too often unfortunately they are not respected or valued for the work they do



## Uncle Frank Pearce

Frank is uncle to thousands of young Australians and recently retired after an exemplary career in Catholic education. He was awarded the Br John Taylor Award for his contribution to the field. His talents are now directed towards building communities and championing projects that benefit all Australians. His achievements span education (preschool to university), employment and welfare. He has served on several advisory committees including the NSW Board of Studies and the Dusseldorp Foundation. As a lecturer at the University of Notre Dame, Frank has empowered young teachers to approach Indigenous education with deeper understanding. Uncle Frank is also member of **The Global Centre for Social Justice and Advocacy Leadership's** advisory council.

For [NAIDOC educational resources click here](#)



**THE NEXT  
GENERATION:  
STRENGTH,  
VISION &  
LEGACY**  
6-13 JULY 2025



## Reflection Questions

---

1. What does it truly mean to “walk beside” Aboriginal people in the journey toward equity in education, and how can this be put into practice in schools and communities?
2. Reflecting on your own educational experiences, how might they differ from those of Aboriginal students, and what role does cultural understanding play in bridging that gap?
3. How do short-term, top-down policies hinder lasting change in Indigenous education, and what alternatives could empower Aboriginal voices in shaping education systems?
4. What assumptions might educators hold—consciously or unconsciously—about Aboriginal students, and how can these be challenged through genuine relationship-building?
5. What practical changes can you make in your role (or future role) to ensure Aboriginal students feel seen, supported, and celebrated for their unique ways of learning and knowing?