



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Should you treat Indigenous students as individuals or as part of a culturally-defined group?

The answer is — *both*.

The question is very similar to one often raised in education and training about particular groups of students, such as students with disabilities, both boys and girls, and other cultural minorities. Should they be part of the mainstream or should they get special treatment and be treated differently, sometimes in settings which are their own preserve?

It is not an 'either/or' question, but the starting point must always be the individual.

To be out of the mainstream is a punishing experience, especially for adolescents. Access, being encouraged and able to do things that other kids do, is most important. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge and support the background, cultures and identity of students. But be cautious in your assumptions.

Culture is a complicated notion. Even in the most remote areas, Australia's Indigenous peoples shop, listen to recorded music, watch television, drive cars and trucks, and manage complex communities. Therefore, materially speaking, few Australian Indigenous people are living an exclusively traditional lifestyle. However, whether or not resources are purchased at a shop or acquired by hunting and gathering, the principles and basic tenets of people's lives remain much the same.

While most Indigenous people live in towns and cities, often in ways which seem generally indistinguishable from the rest of the population, they all have a cultural heritage. This heritage may be powerfully influential on a day-to-day basis or less so. Regardless, it still exists and must be recognised as doing so. Some Indigenous students may choose not to publicly identify, or to not make a big deal of it. That's their choice. But to acknowledge and support awareness of Indigenous cultures is, in our shared circumstances, both just and deeply enriching.