Indigenous Australians have the oldest living cultural history in the world (Australian Government 2015). However, through a series of events came close to extinction. In January 1788 the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay with the intention of colonising Australia and moving convicts from Britain’s overcrowded prison system (Australian Government 2015). For the Indigenous the invasion of their land changed their lifestyle, culture and all that made Australia their homeland. Their entire lives were essentially taken away and forced into conforming to the European norms where there was no place for the Indigenous culture. Today Aborigines are still struggling to connect with their past lifestyles, culture and regain their identity.

Australia was merely established or depending from which view point, invaded, by Europeans in 1788 (Moore, M 2010). Australia has always had a mixture of different cultures, however very different in the way we see Australia today. There were many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities made up of people who had dissimilar beliefs, spoke different languages and had different traditions. However, following the European settlement the Aboriginal society faced rapid changes which dramatically affected their land and changed their way of life (Mooney, M 2013). Recent archaeological evidence suggests that prior to the European settlement Australia’s Indigenous population could have ranged from 315,000 to over one million people, however declined dramatically under the impact of European diseases to which Aboriginals had no immunity, brutal treatment, dispossession, and social and cultural disruption. Settlers also introduced alcohol and tobacco, and substance abuse has remained a chronic problem for Aboriginal communities ever since (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010).
It is said that the European’s saw Australia as ‘terra nullius,’ unoccupied land. Clearly the whole island was inhabited by persons with connection to their land.

Cook’s instructions were to seize the land if it were uninhabited and take ownership of suitable locations ‘with the consent of natives’ if not (Reynolds 1987, p. 136). They saw no evidence of civilisation, agricultural, social or religious structure like their own, and consequently determined that Indigenous people did not own the land but merely roamed it (Australia Museum, 2009). The Aboriginal way of life was seen as primitive, one which European’s had evolved from (Carter, D 2006) However little did they know that everything about Indigenous society is intimately intertwined with, and connected to land. It was suggested that the land was in an ‘unimproved state’ and that the Aborigine’s had done nothing to make it productive, suggesting they held no possession and therefore the land was available for settlement and proceeded as if the Aborigines held no rights to their land (Attwood 2004). So the land they ‘merely roamed’ became fenced and settlements were built. European settlers spread out from Sydney, forcing Indigenous people further away, leading to violence, disconnection with their daily life rituals, knowledgeable people, sacred sites and hunting grounds (National Film & Sound Archive, 2015). Indigenous groups pre-settlement had used different strategies to find the basic necessities of life – water, shelter and food. These certainly vary considerably for different groups living in different environments across Australia and forcing them further away from their areas was detrimental to their survival techniques (Ranzijn, McConnochie & Nolan 2009. Pg. 58).
To begin with the Aboriginal population were generous, based on the understanding of trading food, water, cloth and artefacts. However this relationship became aggressive as they came to realise that the presence of the settlers disrupted their land and resources, which were their way of life (Australian Government, 2015). Aboriginal people were expected to master all types of social skills that White European Australian’s had developed over generations but they were not provided any opportunity to learn such intricate skills. Over time this led to even bigger problems relating to education and employment. Even when Aborigines were provided with the same rights to education and employment as non-Indigenous Australians, the fact remains that due to historical circumstances equality of opportunity is still not provided to Aboriginal people.

One of the first government funded educational organisations was in NSW in 1814 called the ‘Native Institution.’ The institution’s aim was to provide an education for what the settlers described as ‘Native’ children and was built in Parramatta. The government saw this as a way of improving the living conditions of Aboriginal people. The institution was also a boarding school, more often than not the children had be removed from their families and placed under the care of the Superintendent. The children were to learn reading and writing. The boys were taught mechanical arts, manufacturing and agriculture, while the girls learnt needle-work. The Native Institution closed in 1821. Following this government’s attempt to providing an education to some Aboriginal children, schooling in general remained a priority for the churches and charitable organisations. During the 1830s various mission schools were set up in order to teach Aboriginal children basic literacy skills, some work skills
and Christian religion. Education was seen as trying to civilise the Indigenous and teach them the Christian and Western way of life, rescuing them from their heathen ways (Burridge, Whalan & Vaughan 2012. Pg. 13).

Thomson et al. (2012) reports that Indigenous students, perform well below their non-Indigenous peers on average stating that “In 1995 and 2003 the score difference between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students (at Year 4) was 69 and 60 score points respectively” (p. 51). In 2007 the gap grew to 91 score points but reduced to 64 score points in 2011, because “the average score of Indigenous students had increased significantly from 2007, while that of non- Indigenous students remained unchanged” (p. 51). The gap favouring non- Indigenous students has remained at around 70 points in Year 8. The performance of Indigenous students is about two years behind that of non-Indigenous students, this is evident demonstrated in the findings cited above being that Year 7 and Year 9 non- Indigenous students are outperforming Indigenous students in Year 9 (ACARA, 2014).

Supportive programs have been implemented within schools in ensuring we recover a sense of balance between our non-Indigenous society and Indigenous culture. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers implements strategies targeted at teachers and more specifically strategies which target understanding and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (AITSL 2014).
Statistics have shown that a significant percentage of Indigenous children do not have appropriate access to education or do not partake in education that is available to them (Craven, R 2011. Pg. 20). The development of culturally relevant curriculum in schools is critical (Craven, R. 2011. Pg. 20). A framework has been developed as a structural tool to embed history and culture based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ unique sense of identity into the Australian curriculum (ACARA, 2014). Supporting Aboriginality in the classroom and the school can promote Aboriginal students’ sense of identity and pride in their heritage leading to long term benefits (Craven, R 2011. Pg. 19). Indigenous students should be able to experience an education relevant to their needs (Craven, R 2011. Pg. 20). Through embedding a sense of identity, aspects of Country/Place, People and Cultures provide the opportunity for students to expand their knowledge of Australian history (ACARA, 2014) and develop cultural awareness, understanding and respect (Craven, R 2011. Pg.18). Embedding Indigenous Studies within the Australian Curriculum benefits non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. All Australian’s have the right to discover the country’s rich cultural history, be confronted by the social issues facing all Australians today and empowered to act on social issues to work towards being a stronger society (Craven, R 2011. Pg. 18).

What Works is a program which is a set of materials to assist those working in schools. It is designed to support and improve the educational outcomes for Australian Indigenous students (What Works 2015). The program displays successful outcomes through documented case studies and therefore is appropriate in demonstrating the AITSL standards. It has been proven that more Indigenous
Australian’s are succeeding at school, however we have a long way to go to close the gaps (What Works 2015). The program has been applied in both metropolitan and rural areas, Crossways Lutheran School; Ceduna, South Australia is over 800km from Adelaide where Aboriginal people make up more than half of the schools population of around 200. Maintaining the partnership between the school and its community takes a lot of work, time and generosity from all involved, however doing so assists in stepping towards improving the outcomes for Indigenous students (What Works 2015).

The Principle, Darren Boyce explains:

“The bottom line is that culture and identity are inseparable. If the school demonstrates that your culture is valid, and it’s a part of the school, then it’s recognising your identity as well. So, instantly that person is empowered because they are part of this place” (What Works 2015).

Contemporary life will always be shaped by cultural context, past, present and current events. This is above all relevant to Indigenous Australians. Following European settlement in 1788, Indigenous people have faced the deliberate and systematic destruction of racial, political and cultural groups, had families torn apart through the removal of children and from a result of death, been disconnected from their beliefs, spirituality and more so their land and above all continue to endure the trauma of living in a racist world that stereotypes and degrades the Indigenous culture based on their past which people don’t understand still affects them today. Such experiences have profound effects on health, social and emotional wellbeing,
of individuals, families and societies. It is important to remember that the Indigenous culture and society are diverse. There are many different cultures and important differences between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, just as there are important differences within any different nationalities. A challenge for contemporary Australia is to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s right to individuality and the right to define and control culture, identity and forms of religious or spiritual expression and belief through their own framework. It is evident through statistics cited above that education has been targeted as a major concern that needs to be addressed. Although statistics show there have been improvements to Indigenous education, through implementing structural tools and programs, Indigenous people still have the lowest statistics (attendance, retention, continuing their education) compared to other individuals in Australia. Although the government has funded Indigenous education and employment programs there is still more needed to achieve equality and give equal opportunity to all wanting to succeed in society. Skills need to be taught, social attitudes need to be altered and more effort from the community needs to be made so that unemployment and uneducated individuals does not become a condition that is continually passed through future generations to come.

**REFERENCE LIST**

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