

Teaching Australia's truth is an opportunity for all young people

Some will say that it's too political, but right now is an opportunity for everyone to back the proposed change in the school curriculum



Students at Bamaga Junior school in Bamaga on the Northern Peninsula in 2015. 'Young mob who had been taught the true history of colonisation felt as though their stories and history were important and valued.'

Hayley McQuire

Thu 3 Jun 2021

In April the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority announced public consultations into the review of the national curriculum about how First Nations people experienced British colonisation and terra nullius as an invasion that denied their occupation of country and place.

So why is the proposed change so important? Because young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say it is. Shouldn't we listen to what these young people experience when learning history?

The National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition listened to young mob across the continent. The majority felt that it was important to teach the true history of colonisation and invasion, and that when this history is absent in the classroom it leaves them feeling like First Nations people, stories and experiences aren't important. Young mob who had been taught the true history of colonisation, on the other hand, felt as though their stories and history were important and valued.

First Nations young people have a right in international law to a self-determined education. In all honesty, the full realisation of these rights comes through a First Nations-led education system but that doesn't mean we shouldn't also focus on asserting these rights within the mainstream system.

The curriculum change announced in April is only one component of a suite of actions that needs to take place. Educators and schools leaders still have the choice on whether to adopt the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, or not.

This is why NIYEC with our partners In My Blood It Runs and Be launched #LearnOurTruth, a youth-led action-oriented campaign focused on three areas – student agency, school leadership and local histories told by locals. As part of the campaign NIYEC is calling on school leaders and educators to take the educator pledge to build truth-telling into the school culture, ensuring school improvement and curriculum plans include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, support their educators and listen to First Nations students. More than a hundred school leaders have taken up the call.

The campaign acknowledges the incredible influence and responsibility that school leaders hold in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, and to make learning our truth a part of their school culture.

It is essential to ensure that it does not fall on the shoulders of the one or two First Nations employees or parents at a school to educate the entire staff and make that school culturally safe. This is an unrealistic expectation, and means that it's First Nations people who are owning all the accountability. It also would mean that unless there is a First Nations person in every single school in Australia, that students will not have access to a learning experience that accurately teaches the true history of this continent, and First Nations experiences of that history.

First Nations people have the right to reclaim narratives and to determine how they want their stories, experiences and knowledge shared. This is a matter for each nation to determine. It's the responsibility of all schools who operate on unceded lands to respect that.

Right now is an opportunity for everyone to back the proposed change in the curriculum. Some will say that it's too political, to tell the truth. For me, it's only political if your politics are grounded in maintaining the ongoing oppression of First Nations people.

Whether you like it or not, the truth is all around us. It's in the country. It's in our communities. It's in the systems and structures that continue to influence our lives.

Teaching the truth provides an opportunity for all young people to understand their connection to the past, and how it influences the inheritance of tomorrow.

Hayley McQuire *is a Darumbal & South Sea Islander woman, and co-founder of the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition.*