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VALUING OUR HISTORIES IN SCHOOLING AND BEYOND

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is timely that this conference has been convened to promote and support the recording of family and community histories. These histories can be offered as an alternative to the one sided view of Australian history currently presented in our schools, and provide students with a balance of viewpoints about events that have occurred in this country in the last two hundred years or so. In the past schools have taught only one perspective of the colonisation of this country, and have shown little respect for views other than those presented in written reports, letters, press articles and other documents by the British colonisers.

Anyone who considers any event whatsoever, will know that there are differing viewpoints about what actually occurred. Different people see and interpret things in different ways, depending on the circumstances at the time, their backgrounds, their values and understandings, prior experience and knowledge. We witness this constantly in our newspapers and on our television sets. By reading either two different newspapers of the same date, or even two separate editions of the same newspaper, the so-called 'facts' of particular situations are often changed or even contradictory.

Education systems, particularly the Queensland Department of Education, are now adopting the principle of self-managing schools which require the involvement of the total school community in the planning, delivery and evaluation of school programs and activities. Parents and community members will soon have opportunities to say what is taught and how it is taught. When this policy becomes a reality, the door will be opened for the inclusion of local histories, cultures and contemporary issues in school curricula.

Because of this new direction that brings with it the potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members to be involved in school-based decision-making, this presentation is aimed to empower you by providing:

- information about policies and other documents which support the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultural information in school curriculum;

- reasons for including Aboriginal and Torres Strait histories in terms of advantages for students;

- suggestions about curriculum areas and subjects in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultural information might be taught;

- examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander personal, family and community histories which are being used in some schools; and

- advice concerning research for personal, family or community histories as part of a tertiary qualification.

2. NATIONALLY AGREED POLICIES AND DIRECTIONS

A) ROYAL COMMISSION INTO ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY (1991)

Support for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander histories to be taught in our schools is provided by recommendation 290 of the report by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which states:

That curricula of schools at all levels should reflect the fact that Australia has an Aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters. It is essential that Aboriginal viewpoints, interests, perceptions and expectations are reflected in curricula, teaching and administration of schools.

B) NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION POLICY (1989)

The Royal Commission's recommendation supports the direction sought by Aboriginal education consultative groups and communities throughout Australia for two decades. It also reinforces goals 20 and 21 of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1989) which aim...

To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity; and

To provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures.

Both of these documents, as well as the national Reconciliation and Schooling Strategy (which emphasises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in schools) have been endorsed, and are now being implemented, by all state and territory governments.

C) COMMON AND AGREED NATIONAL GOALS OF SCHOOLING (1989)

In addition to the above documents which relate specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, at the 60th Australian Education Council in Hobart, 14-16 April 1989, the Ministers for Education from the Commonwealth and all states and territories agreed on a set of goals for schooling one of which aims:

To provide students with an understanding and respect for our cultural heritage including the particular cultural background of Aboriginal and ethnic groups. (goal 8)

D) THE NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE CURRICULUM

Documents which relate to the actual design and content of curriculum are those developed during the period 1990-1993 as components of the National Collaborative Curriculum Project.

The notion of a national curriculum refers to the overall framework and guidelines for the type of information to be taught and level of knowledge, skills and understandings to be achieved by students during the schooling years. Curriculum content offered in schools is largely determined by individual states and territories, who may use the national documents to guide curriculum developers and teachers, with the ex-

pectation that information relevant to particular local areas and/or people will be included in classroom offerings.

Following approaches by a group of Aboriginal educators from state and territory systems, the Australian Education Council agreed in 1991 to include Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies in curriculum to be offered in all Australian schools. Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies is to be secured within the Studies of Society and Environment key learning area, and to inform each of the other seven key learning areas that comprise the national collaborative curriculum.

Most states and territories, including Queensland, are currently using national collaborative curriculum documents to guide statewide curriculum development. It is possible to argue for the inclusion of Aboriginal viewpoints and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints in subject areas being developed for Queensland schools.

3. WHY INCLUDE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HISTORIES AND VIEWPOINTS IN CURRICULUM?

As well as presenting another set of views on the occupation of this country which will provide some balance to Australian history, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories in curriculum will have particular relevance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, by contributing to:

- a supportive learning environment;
- enhanced confidence and self-esteem within the school setting;
- improved learning outcomes through the provision of culturally relevant curriculum; and
- a stronger cultural identity

For non-Indigenous students, these histories will develop and enhance:

- the recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are part of the heritage of all Australians;
- cross-cultural awareness and culturally sensitive attitudes and communication skills; and
- an understanding of contemporary Australia and Australian society and environment, based on historical events.

In the school environment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories may assist school staff members to:

- develop knowledge and understanding of Torres Strait Islander students and Aboriginal students in their school;
- value the backgrounds and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their parents and community members; and
- heighten awareness of issues of racism and provide a more supportive environment to address them.

(Adapted from *National Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies K-12*, 1993.)

Overall, the valuing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oral histories as legitimate records of past events will achieve a great deal towards a true reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

4. THE REALITY OF INCLUSION

A) NATIONALLY

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and perspectives in the statements and profiles of the National Collaborative Curriculum marked the first official recognition of the relevance, and indeed the impor-

tance, of presenting traditional and contemporary Indigenous issues within the full range of school curriculum. It represented an exciting challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to at last be in a position to include histories, art, writing practises, language and issues in mainstream curriculum to support the learnings of our own Indigenous students and redress some of the racist attitudes prevalent in the wider community.

Specific materials to inform curriculum writers and teachers of culturally appropriate processes, practices and resources for including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, were developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, in consultation with consultative groups, communities, teachers and education systems. It was intended that these materials complement and accompany the mainstream documents of the national curriculum. After two and a half years of meetings, workshops, writing sessions, mailing drafts for comment, etc, the following documents were finalised and forwarded to the Curriculum Corporation in Melbourne for publication:

the National Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, K-12;

Criteria and resource guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, K-12; and

'You can do it too' - a guide for teachers to include Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies across the curriculum areas. (This is a package comprising a video of good practice examples and an accompanying booklet.)

The above supporting materials stipulate that Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies are to be studied in a context which '...presents Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal people within an accurate and culturally inclusive history of Australia.' They also

stress that any such curriculum content must be negotiated with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Our excitement and enthusiasm about the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues within curriculum has been short lived. The statements and profiles of the national Collaborative curriculum have been published and circulated to education systems and other relevant groups, BUT the supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies materials are still awaiting publication.

B) WITHIN QUEENSLAND

Using the national documents as a guide, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit of the Queensland Department of Education had a major part to play in rewriting the Year 5 Social Studies Sourcebooks for Queensland schools. The Year 5 sourcebook contains most of the information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, cultures, history, within the Primary Social Studies course. Although Indigenous writers developed the draft documents, in consultation with the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Committee (QATSIECC) and communities, the document when released to schools became the subject of negative media and political debate centred around the use of terminology such as the word 'invasion'.

The foreword and introductory section of the revised unit 1 of the Queensland Year 5 Social Studies Sourcebook clearly indicate that the document presents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Within the document it is stated that 'To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their land, seas and waterways were invaded...', and yet this has not been accepted by politicians, journalists and a proportion of the overall Queensland population.

It seems that only one-sided representations of events of the last two hundred or so years are

acceptable to the majority of politicians and the media, despite the recent endorsement of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. By their non-acceptance of Indigenous viewpoints, objectors have devalued the stories of our elders and maintained the status quo in terms of Western dominance and beliefs of Indigenous cultural/social inferiority.

Arguments used against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints have tended to imply that oral histories are not as accurate and therefore of less value than written records. During the debate about the Year 5 Social Studies Sourcebook, it became obvious that the opinions of Anglo-Australian historians were afforded more credibility than those of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community people.

5. WAYS OF INTRODUCING AND PRESENTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HISTORIES IN SCHOOL CURRICULUM: WHAT YOU CAN DO.

Personal family or community histories can be recorded, researched and presented in a number of ways, of which the following are some examples:

- as written autobiographies, telling the story of your own life, as

If everyone cared - Margaret Tucker
Don't take your love to town - Ruby Langford
Wandering girl - Glenyse Ward
A bastard like me - Charlie Perkins

My Place - Sally Morgan
A boy's life - Jack Davis
Broken dreams - Bill Dodd
Pride against prejudice - Ida West
Somebody now - Ellie Gaffney
Son of Alyandandabu - Joe McGinness
To my delight - Bill Cohen

- jointly written autobiographies/stories such as

Aunty Rita - Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins
Do not go around the edges - Daisy Utemorrhah and Pat Torres (This is a combination of prose, poetry and pictures.)

- as biographies, telling stories or incidents of somebody else's life, such as

My people's life - Jack Mirritji
Down there with me on the Cowra Mission - Peter Read
Women of the centre - Adele Pring
My kind of people - Wayne Coolwell
Living Aboriginal history of Victoria - Alick Jackomos and Derek Forwell

- as an edited collection of short autobiographies...

Survival in our own land - Christobel Mattingley and Ken Hampton (editors)
Raparapa - Paul Marshall (ed)
Fighters and singers - Isobel White, Diane Barwick and Betty Meehan (eds)
The lost children - Carol Edwards and Peter Read (eds)

- as videos...

My life as an Aboriginal - Essie Coffey
Lousy little sixpence - Gerald Bostock and Alec Morgan
Living Aboriginal History of Victoria - Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell

Materials such as those listed above are presented in a variety of forms, and can be used in subjects such as social studies, history, English, cultural studies, women's studies.

If you have not had an opportunity to see the variety of formats for presenting histories, the above may provide some ideas for producing materials for use in schools or for making them more widely available.

Remember that if you write the histories yourselves you will retain ownership under current copyright laws.

6. RESEARCHING YOUR PERSONAL, FAMILY OR COMMUNITY HISTORY AS PART OF A TERTIARY QUALIFICATION

Some universities offer courses in researching your family/community history, both in terms of written records and oral stories. As well as being guided in research and presentation, you can gain a tertiary qualification for this work. One such institution which might be a good starting point to make enquiries if you are interested, is the University of New England at Armidale in New South Wales; or you might like to enquire at your nearest university.

It is encouraging that at least some tertiary institutions are demonstrating that they value our histories. It is imperative that others share that valuing, because until we are recognised and valued as the Indigenous people of this country, together with our histories, cultures, languages and lifestyles, there can be little chance of 'reconciliation'.

7. CONCLUSION

As outlined in 4 (above), attempts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to introduce a more balanced view of Australian history to school curriculum have not been totally accepted by education systems.

I believe, however, that real change can be made at the local level, by participating in the management processes of schools. Because education systems expect local involvement in school decision-making, you, as parents and community members, will have opportunities to express opinions about what is taught and how it may be taught. The power to do this is now vested in you - and you have the nationally agreed policies, reports and curriculum (outlined in section 2 of this paper) to refer to as supporting documents. Your own family or community history may then be sought for inclusion in school curriculum offerings, and if you choose to do so, you can achieve a tertiary qualification at the same time as researching and writing.

There are many great stories to be told - some funny, some sad, some heroic... We cannot escape the fact that many of them have political implications because they reflect past government policies and practices. I believe, however, that this should not deter us from ensuring their survival for future generations.

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