Truth telling in the Australian education system

By Tracy Woodroffe
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First Nations people please be advised this article speaks of racially discriminating moments in history, including the distress and death of First Nations people.

In a recent radio interview with 4BC, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said students should learn about the atrocities suffered by Indigenous people in Australia. Historical events such as massacres should be part of the Australian history curriculum. Mr Albanese added it was something that should be done without feelings of shame from non-Indigenous teachers.

In addition, Mr Albanese has stated teachers' cultural competency could be further highlighted as an educational issue to be addressed. Cultural competency involves an organisation or individual valuing the importance of other cultures and using this to inform their working practices.

This is one of the reasons the Australian education system requires the voice of Indigenous educators: Australian teachers (most of whom are non- Indigenous) can lack confidence and effectiveness in teaching Indigenous students and delivering Indigenous curriculum content.

Teaching true Australian history that represents a more balanced telling is vital. But it is only one aspect of Australia's education system that requires urgent attention.

The biggest problem with education

The Australian education system is founded on principles espoused by British colonisers and continued and redeveloped by Australians. This way of schooling predominantly follows Western ideas about education and how people learn.

As a result, the education system is not accessible to everyone. For example, Indigenous people in Australia have had their own educational practices in accordance with Indigenous knowledge systems for more than 60,000 years. These methods of teaching involved Indigenous perspectives of the world encompassing understanding about what knowledge should be learned and how.

This is why education needs to be flexible and adaptable to different ways of learning. Not all children are the same, or learn in the same way, and they can have different learning and cultural needs.

Mr Albanese has raised one issue that could be extremely important for everyone in Australia. However not all stakeholders will necessarily see it that way. Parents and teachers will have their own priorities for their children and changing the history curriculum may not even be on their radar. Engagement with changes may be slow.

Australian prime ministers have commented on the history curriculum in the past. This has included improvements over time to teaching about Indigenous people in Australia, without necessarily having an in-depth curriculum or practical understanding. These improvements have been slow. However, the lead-up to the planned referendum on whether to institute an Indigenous Voice to Parliament is an ideal time to discuss further opportunities for progress in education for children in Australia.

Affecting systemic change

Many Indigenous people in Australia experience difficulties in engaging with the current system, as documented annually in the NAPLAN assessment. Difficulties may include language barriers, Indigenous culture not represented in classrooms and curriculum, and disengagement. This is an ongoing concern, discussed and investigated by many academics both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Curriculum and ways of teaching have been addressed with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority continuing to update the Australian curriculum. These updates aim to be inclusive of Indigenous culture through cross-

curriculum priorities.

These priorities are still not key learning areas within a school curriculum that focuses instead on Maths, Science and English. They are offered to teachers as opportunities to embed Indigenous related information into key learning situations, but they are not mandatory.

Difficulties could be made worse by an apparent lack of teacher knowledge and efficacy in working with Indigenous students and in teaching Indigenous curriculum content. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership has attempted to improve this by implementing changes to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. These changes address teachers' cultural competency, by increasing cultural teaching resources, due to be released.

However these efforts to improve our Australian education system are temporary fixes to specific problems. We need a more complete approach guided by Indigenous education experts who understand these issues from Indigenous perspectives.

What have children been getting told about Australia's history?

As an educator for more than 30 years, nothing has crystallised more for me the problems with the system than listening to students studying to become teachers.

Year in and year out, I hear how they didn't know about the degree of harsh treatment, cruelty and trauma suffered by Indigenous people in Australia since colonisation. "We didn't learn this in school," they say.

This proves school students need to be given a balanced and truthful education about Australia's history. This needs to include the stories of massacres, dispossession, segregation and exclusion, as well as the personal long-term impact of the Stolen Generations and other racist government policies.

If these current teaching students had been afforded this education, the teaching workforce might have been better prepared to teach this. They would already have the necessary foundational knowledge and the ability to empathise through education and understanding. Without cultural competency through education we can be left with ignorance and racism, which are counterproductive to Australia's journey to reconciliation.

Decolonising education

Decolonisation is a word becoming more widely used to express the need for a more balanced education system that includes First Nations peoples. It has been popularised for many years in countries such as Canada and New Zealand.

Decolonisation has been defined as restorative justice through cultural, psychological and economic freedom.

Embedding Indigenous ways of learning, honouring different knowledge systems, and acknowledging the histories that have impacted us would decolonise our education system. This would also provide an opportunity for all of Australia to understand First Nations peoples
and centralise these cultures within the curriculum as foundational learning for all.

Indigenous educators in the Northern Territory recommended that Indigenous knowledge in education for both Indigenous students and Indigenous teachers is of great importance. It is valuable to all teachers to understand that people do not leave their culture at the school fence and pick it back up when they leave school at the end of the day.

Before anything can happen, there needs to be an informed audit of the larger underlying issues within our national education system. Although it's significant, the way we teach Australian history is only one small part.

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