

Theme 1: Equity in Australian schools

Ms Darcel Russell, Deputy Federal Secretary, Australian Education Union

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this morning. AS Louise said, my name is Darcel Russell and I am a Noonuckle/Gorenpal woman from the seas and lands of the Quandamooka people, which is known in English as Moreton Bay. I'm from an island called Minjerribah which is known in English as Stradbroke Island or North Stradbroke Island.

I would firstly, as is our custom, like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and Aunty Jeanette Phillips who opened the meeting this morning.

I would like to thank them for allowing us to meet on their country today and to acknowledge their ancestors and elders and hope that our memories of their struggles will stand strong during the course of these deliberations. I also, as is custom, bring greetings from my elders to the elders of the Ngunnawal people and acknowledge the hard work of the old people in our communities who fight to keep the spirit alive.

I would also like to acknowledge the elders and distinguished guests here in this room today and pay particular respect to Kevin O'Keefe who is an elder in the Indigenous education industry and in his own community in his own right. It's really lovely to see you here, Kevin.

My speech is a lot more specific than Richard's discussion around the breadth of equity; I'm going to concentrate specifically on Indigenous education and give you a little bit of an assessment on Indigenous education in the Education Revolution.

In almost three months time it will be the second anniversary of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's historic speech to Parliament—his, and Australia's apology to the Stolen Generations. The speech was a watershed in Australian history, where the Australian government took responsibility for the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents, but just as importantly, outlined a template for the future. The Prime Minister said:

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians. A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.

A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed. A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility. A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

There comes a time in the history of nations when their people must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future.

Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time. That is why the parliament is today here assembled: to deal with this unfinished business of the nation, to remove a great stain from this nation's soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

I don't normally quote Prime Ministers at length, but I did think that it was important to remind ourselves of the scene of opportunity that Kevin Rudd set for us as a country on this historic day and I was happy, and lucky enough to be in Canberra, with Clive actually, on the lawns of Parliament house on the day that the Prime Minister gave his apology. And as a very small participant in this moment I can only reflect that it was a *seminal* moment for our country. It opened new possibilities, daring us to not only dream of a new future, but to build this future in to a reality—to deal with the 'unfinished business' and 'open a new chapter in the history of our great land'.

Reflecting two years on, of course, many of those opportunities have been captured and built upon. But also some of them have been misaligned and some have potentially been lost—although not irrevocably, I think. The Rudd Labor Government—as we have heard from the Deputy Prime Minister and the Deputy Secretary of the Department today—the Rudd Labor Government's first term in office has certainly been reformist. In education the 'revolution' (regardless of thoughts on its roll-out) is upon us. National Partnership Agreements, facilitated through COAG, have changed the nature and shape of 'specific purpose' payments to the states and territories; a national curriculum is being framed and written; new national data sets are about to be released; a *National Action plan on Indigenous Education* is being written; the Early Childhood Education system is being reformed with the development of a new registration and quality assurance system; and in terms of Indigenous peoples the specific purpose partnerships and strategies are around, of course—'Closing the Gap' strategy.

These are but a few of the reforms being undertaken at present. Many of them inter-relate. For example, the development of the broader COAG reform on early childhood education and child care, whilst inclusive of Indigenous peoples, *at least in a policy and process sense*, is complemented by the Indigenous Early Childhood Development National Partnership.

I did say purposefully 'at least in a policy and process sense', because I believe that there are some major blockages to Indigenous education reforms which are not related to policies or processes. I think that over many years there have been many good quality policies in relation to Indigenous education; there have also been many, many people of exceptional goodwill and expertise working at all levels of the education system to implement those

policies. However, in my assessment of where some of the blockages are, there is, and continues to be, a deeply entrenched lack of capacity from and within systems, in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our communities. And I'll speak, because the theme of this conference today is assessing the Education Revolution, of two cases in evidence of this.

The first case being the case of the national curriculum. Following the Prime Minister's speech there was (and still is, I believe) a sense of hope and good will from the Aboriginal community, and all communities in Australia, that the nation had begun another process of fundamental change in its relationships with its first nation's peoples. As the Prime Minister stated:

... to deal with unfinished business, to remove the great stain from the nation's soul, and in a true spirit of reconciliation, open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia.

One would think that, given the National Curriculum will be the foundation stone of the future knowledge of future generations of our children, that the development of such a worthy document and worthy process would in fact begin with the premise of *how* this curriculum could open a doorway to the new chapter in the history of 'this great land, Australia'. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

I'm about to go into a critique, but before I do that I would like to do is to acknowledge that ACARA has indeed embarked upon a consultation processes with Aboriginal peoples and groups, and ACARA has in fact appointed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to writing panels as well. However, in a range of forums that I've been attending recently, there has been grave concern expressed by many Indigenous educators, that regardless of the processes that are being undertaken, the appointments that have been made and policy frameworks that are being put into place, ACARA *hasn't yet got it*.

These concerns were evidenced by the recently released *Position Paper* on the senior secondary curriculum, where the word 'Indigenous' was mentioned only twice: in the 'English as an Additional Language or Dialect' stream and in the 'Ancient History' stream.

Working with a group of senior Indigenous educators, including Professor Peter Buckskin, chair of the National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN) and the South Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, and Dr Kaye Price, Director of the Ngunnawal Centre at the University of Canberra, who many of you in Canberra may know, (and who I would say is one of Australia's pre-eminent curriculum development experts, not only in Indigenous education).the AEU developed and circulated by email a *Statement of Inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives in the Australian Curriculum* which provides a number of recommendations to the Australian Government and ACARA. These being :

- provide greater structured opportunities for Indigenous educators and community members from all areas of Australia to engage collectively in all levels of the process of the development of the Australian Curriculum; and

- through this process ensure that the Australian Curriculum accurately include and reflect perspectives of Indigenous Australia—not only in the Ancient History stream;
- that consideration be given to a stand-alone stream of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in the Australian Curriculum;
- that Indigenous people are appointed to all panels established to guide the development of the Australian Curriculum;
- that an Indigenous person with appropriate educational qualifications/experience and expertise in curriculum development is appointed to the ACARA board; and
- that Indigenous educators are employed by ACARA to drive the process.

We circulated this statement by email across the education community and within a week received over 400 endorsements for our calls in this particular email, which just goes to show the level of concern that not only the Indigenous education community, but the broader education community has, around the structural omission of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges from the Australian Curriculum.

Another example of the need to build capacity in government and systems is a project that the AEU has been working on with Prof. Mick Dodson, who as you will well know is currently, amongst other things, Australian of the Year. The process has been an organic one, to say the least. It began with Mick's acceptance speech as Australian of the Year to the National Press Club where, if you might recall, he mentioned his vision for the beginning of the school year 2010 to be 'all children school-ready, kitted up with full bellies having had a good night sleep the night before, all off to school with the appropriate uniforms, the appropriate materials, ready to begin school'. Mick called on a number of people to assist him including Dr Chris Sarra, Professor Buckskin, Tom Calma and a number of others of us from the AEU to develop this vision into a broader reality.

Following a number of meetings of the small group, there was a determination to call for a long-term plan, not to build submarines (as referred to in Richard's speech) but actually to develop a twenty-five year plan for the future of Indigenous education. In fact we called it the *National Action Plan on Indigenous Education* which might sound familiar to you because MCEECDYA has actually just made a decision to develop one itself. However, the MCEECDYA plan is a five year plan, and in my view a good beginning, but not the long-term vision-making approach that we need to be bringing to Indigenous education reform. Unfortunately, the MCEECDYA plan at this stage seems to be a document which brings together jurisdictional activities, many of which are already occurring. The point is that there is no point from which to 'open this new chapter in Australian history'. There is no thread which ties together our collective aspirations to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids have the right to access the highest quality of education we can provide to them. As I said previously, the MCEECDYA plan is a good beginning, however, there is an urgent need to go further. To extend our vision and our thinking beyond the realms of what

we know is already occurring. The meeting convened by the AEU provides some pointers to a possible way forward, with themes arising from the meeting including:

Replication of success across all systems, across all levels, requires transformational strategies.

Processes for enacting a fundamental shift in systems and the way they do business with Indigenous peoples are required.

Indigenous cultures, languages, knowledges, paradigms, epistemologies and pedagogies must be recognised by the system as legitimate.

There is a need to re-frame the education conversation in relation to Indigenous education to include the birth-to-death philosophy of learning.

There is a need to build the capacity of the teaching workforce to work with Indigenous students, parents and their communities.

There must be a high expectation agenda, and this must be enacted across all levels of the system.

Systems must acknowledge the levels of skills and expertise in the workforce of existing Indigenous educators including Aboriginal and Torres Strait education workers.

A framework was developed out of that meeting that included four big-ticket items. The framework at its centre had

- student, parent and community engagement. The goal of such a framework being to develop a relationship between students, parents and schools to foster notions of dual accountability and shared responsibility.
- Workforce is the second pillar of the framework, as producing a high-quality, high-skill and stable workforce has to be seen as central to any process of reform. I think that in all the debate around quality teaching, the thing that governments are not tackling head-on at the moment is the fact that the turn-over of teaching staff in the Northern Territory is around about a third every year. So when you have such a high level of turnover in your teaching workforce it's very, very difficult to build strategies around quality teaching and educational leadership.
- Access to, and sustainability of, education provision and delivery: again this is another subject—and Richard touched on it in his speech—that people seem to forget about. The AEU, in response to the Northern Territory Intervention when the Howard Government was in power, accessed what minimal data was available at the time to do a survey of how many kids in the Northern Territory we believe to be missing out on schooling. We compared census data to enrolment data, because that was the only data available at that time. The figure, between preschool and Year 12, was seven and a half thousand children. I kid you not, in our country Australia: seven and a half thousand children. Now I said that the data difficult to access and compare, but I will reiterate to you that if there is even ONE child in our country that cannot

access schooling because they have no access to a school, we cannot provide education to even one child, regardless of where they live, then what else are we prepared to concede in our country?

- Finally, the fourth pillar for reform included the need to ensure that schools and teachers are delivering high quality curriculum which embeds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and viewing and relating to the world. There was an overwhelming view from this group that the curriculum should not be a separate curriculum developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but it should be the mainstream curriculum that embedded and included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges.

I'm going to finish there but before I do it's important culturally for me to connect with peoples from my homeland when I'm speaking. One of the ways that I do this is to read some poetry written by a poet from my country, a woman I grew up with and knew very fondly as Aunty Kath. Many of you may know her as Oodgeroo Noonuckle. I will just read the last stanza of a poem that she wrote called 'Song of Hope'. The last stanza says this:

*To our father's fathers, the pain and sorrow
To our children's children, the glad tomorrow.*