

Submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission – Education

The voices of primary school students participating in the Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conferences, 2018 - 2023 – Reflections and learnings and their call for truth-telling and justice for Aboriginal people

1. Introduction

Since 2018, Darebin City Council has been coordinating the Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference for Year 5 students inviting all Darebin primary schools to participate.

The seed of what is now a rich, dynamic, interactive learning program of Aboriginal history and culture and truth-telling led by Aboriginal cultural educators which brings 20+ Darebin primary schools together, began with a few local schools requesting support from Council to facilitate Aboriginal-focused incursions. This was made through the Darebin Education Network, an Advisory Committee to Council.

After initial internal conversations between Aboriginal and non-indigenous Darebin Council staff; with Darebin Aboriginal Advisory Committee; with Koorie Education Support staff in the Department of Education and Training; with Aboriginal cultural educators and with local schools, the idea of a Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference exploring, deepening, and amplifying the annual NAIDOC theme, evolved.

For over 20 years, Darebin Aboriginal Advisory Committee (DAAC), has been providing advice and recommendations to Council on matters affecting local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As such DAAC was central to advising, directing and affirming the development of the Yarning Conference.

In addition, Darebin Council's longstanding partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, Elders and advocates and community-controlled organisations; Darebin's 2019 Statement of Commitment to Traditional Owners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (first developed in 1998) and Council's deepening partnerships with many Darebin schools with a commitment to equity in education, provided Council's own policy and program context for the development of the Yarning Conference.

More recently the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan, 2016-2026 provided the education policy context for Darebin Council's work.

The Yarning conference is also embedded in the Darebin Council Plan 2021-2025 action, "deliver initiatives that support truth telling, and provide opportunities for culturally diverse communities and our broader Darebin community to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history."

The Issues Paper on Education prepared by the Yoorrook Justice Commission presents key structural determinants that perpetrate and maintain educational disadvantage for Aboriginal children and young people.

Darebin Council's submission speaks to three key themes through the voices of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who participated in the Yarning Conferences over the past six years:

- racism and cultural safety for First Peoples students, education staff and families;
- curriculum successes and failures in teaching First Peoples' perspectives, histories and experiences, including teacher competency and commitment;



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- case studies demonstrating examples of good practice, innovative approaches or successful models that could be adopted or expanded upon to improve the educational experiences of First Peoples students.



The heart of this submission is the voices of the students who have participated in various Yarning Conferences – their learning, reflections and the truth they want to tell and change, about historical and ongoing impact of colonisation and racism that perpetuate educational injustices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is in Section 2.

The voices of these students are in videos prepared and included in Darebin Council's Youtube Channel and Yarning Conference photographs from Council's website. They include poetry, artwork and students in learning and action at their schools as they prepare and respond to the Yarning Conference.

After the presentation of the voices of the students as essential to Council's submission below, background information is presented which includes objectives of the Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference, the process of development and key aspects of the Conference - pre-Conference learning activities which lead to the Yarning Conference event itself. This information provides the context of the six Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conferences, as a case study of potential good and innovative practice in education.

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2. VOICES OF DAREBIN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR TRUTH-TELLING AND JUSTICE



The voices of year 5 primary school students participating in the Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conferences, 2018 - 2023 – Reflections and learnings and their call for truth-telling and justice for all Aboriginal people.

There are five resources which highlights student voices for truth-telling and justice.

2.1 Darebin Student Voices – Always Was Always Will Be, Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference 2020

In 2020, the Yarning Conference was held online due to COVID. They were learning from home.

These videos have been recorded by students at home and collated by Darebin Council.

They were prepared based on the pre-Conference learning material.

The poems prepared by students were in response to the poem *Spirit of the NAIDOC March* – by Clothing the Gaps, and the art works/posters were prepared by students in response to the statement by the Darebin Aboriginal Advisory Committee – Our Blacks Lives Matter.

- **Poetry for truth-telling and justice – 5 minutes**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yLisUMrfUU>
- **Art for truth-telling and justice – 4 minutes**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUE4qfeHTUY>

2.2 Darebin Student Voices – Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up! Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference 2022

This is a collection of videos and voices of students from different schools before, during and after the NAIDOC Yarning Conference prepared by students and teachers and produced by Darebin Council.

- **What does it mean to Get up! Stand up! Show up! with Aboriginal people – Video of actions in schools and student ideas - 8 minutes**
[Darebin Students' Voices – 2022 Yarning Conference – Get Up! Stand Up! Show Up! - YouTube](#)

2.3 Photographs of the Yarning Conference – Students in action and making their voices and ideas heard and learning from Aboriginal cultural educators

- Photographs of the 2022 Yarning Conference and an article that describes the event by Uncle Charles Pakana.
[Darebin Schools NAIDOC Yarning Conference 2022 | Darebin Council](#)
- Photographs of the 2023 Yarning Conference and an article that describes the event by Uncle Charles Pakana.

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3. Details and context - Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference (2018 – 2023)

3.1 Objectives:

- To support schools and teachers to embed teaching and learning and truth-telling about Aboriginal history and culture from a local, Darebin, place-based perspective;
- To inspire and challenge year 5 students to learn the truth about Australian history; and treatment past and present of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to develop awareness and pride in Aboriginal culture.
- To bring diverse schools from the different sectors together and provide the opportunity for students and teachers to learn directly and respectfully in an interactive and collaborative way from Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultural educators, Elders, advocates.

3.2 Process and program:

There are two interlinked parts to the Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conferences: the Pre-Conference learning activities carried out by all participating students and schools prior to their participation in the Yarning Conference; and the Yarning Conference event.

The process in the development of both the pre-Conference learning activities and the program of the Yarning Conference centres the voices and the priorities of Aboriginal cultural educators.

The details of the processes for the development of the program are highlighted below.

3.2.1 Pre-Conference learning activities

It is expected that all teachers and students participating in the Yarning Conference carry out the learning activities as preparation for their participation to the Yarning Conference event.

The topics, ideas and information for the pre-Conference learning are developed through the advice and expertise of many.

Key cultural advisors:

- Clothing the Gaps:
Clothing the Gaps, Aboriginal owned and led social enterprise, have been the central cultural advisors since the first Yarning Conference and have MCd the Yarning Conference event over the past six years.
- Darebin Aboriginal Advisory Committee (DAAC). In 2020 the DAAC 'Our Black Lives Matter' statement was included for students to learn and consider as part of their pre-conference learning.
- Aboriginal Partnerships Officer, Darebin City Council, Uncle Stuart McFarlane
- Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders and leaders - Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders and leaders have provided essential advice for the content of both the pre-Conference learning and the Conference itself. They have included Auntie Joy Murphy, Mandy Nicholson and Uncle Bill Nicholson.
- Koorie Education Support Officer (NEMA, DET)
- VAEAI (three of the six programs)

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Other key advisors and contributors:

- Members of the Darebin Schools' Working Group – A committed group of teachers and Principals from up to 12 Darebin primary schools across school sectors. The schools who have consistently contributed to the working group from the beginning include Reservoir East PS, Reservoir Views PS, Charles La Trobe PS, Kingsbury PS, Preston PS, Thornbury PS, Maharishi School, East Preston Islamic College, St Joseph's School.

Content of the Pre-Conference Learning Activities

The content of the Pre-Conference learning has evolved over the past six years.

Every year, students must read, learn and discuss the ideas held within the NAIDOC statement prepared by the NAIDOC Committee and learn about Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders past and present. These are key and consistent parts.

But each year, new content emerges and is included depending on the NAIDOC theme and on the advice from various cultural advisors and educators (as per above).

The pre-Conference learning is prepared to ensure a reflective, critical, creative and participatory learning by students individually, in small groups and whole-of-class. It is an essential basis for students to being fully ready to participate, contribute, learn more deeply, have their voices heard and included and enjoy the Yarning Conference.

Some of the highlighted examples included in the Pre-Conference learning activities are listed below:

2018

- Aboriginal women leaders and Elders from the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll
- The Long Walk – Video and preparation for the *little* Long Walk as part of the Yarning Conference event

2019

- Uluru Statement of the Heart
- January 26 – Statement by Darebin City Council - Why Darebin City Council decided not to celebrate January 26?

2020

- Our Black Lives Matter - Statement by the Darebin Aboriginal Advisory Committee
- Spirit of the NAIDOC March – Poem and Video - Clothing the Gaps

2021

- Truth-telling - Little Things – Song - Ziggy Ramo
- Caring for Country - Rewilding and planting indigenous plants at schools
- Ganbu Gulin – Film, Darebin City Council and Darebin Aboriginal Advisory Committee - Why Darebin City Council decided not to celebrate January 26?

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2022

- Aboriginal Advancement League – Murals
- Truth-telling – Learning about the Yoorrook Justice Commission in Victoria - Reading and reflecting on statements and visual sketches made by Elders during public hearings and Yarning Circles.
- Free the Flag – Video – Clothing the Gaps

2023

- Voices of Aboriginal Elders – Video - Clothing the Gaps
- Truth-telling - Colour of Your Jumper – Song - Uncle Archie Roach

Participation in learning:

Many of the bigger participating schools who are unable to send all their Year 5 students to the actual Yarning Conference event have decided that all their Year 5 and sometimes their Year 6 students also, will learn from the information, lessons and activities in the pre-Conference material.

For example, in the 2022 and 2023 Yarning Conferences, whilst only over 400 students from across 22 primary schools could attend the actual Yarning Conference, over **700** Year 5 students carried out the pre-Conference learning activities as part of a whole of Year 5 approach by the schools.

3.2.2 Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conferences

a) Program

The Yarning Conference is held in the third week of Term IV. It is programmed in three parts:

- **Together:** All schools and students together with Aboriginal special guest speakers and always Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders and Leaders. The MCs, Clothing the Gaps, have been holding and generating the atmosphere of all the Conferences.
- **Interactive and participatory cultural workshops led by cultural educators:** Up to 10 interactive workshops ranging from language, dance – traditional and hip-hop, Caring for Country, art-making, song-writing and singing, media and finding your voice, decolonisation, Trad Games, Walking Country. These workshops are all determined and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural educators.
- **Smoking Ceremony and March** – Most of the marches have been led by the Long Walk Foundation, and have been done as a *little* Long Walk, whilst in 2023 the students marched '*For Our Elders*'.

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b) Amplifying Student voices – Many and evolving ways

There are several ways in which student voices were promoted, supported and amplified as part of the program of the Yarning Conferences and this has also evolved.

- ***Student evaluation***

In 2018 and 2019, students were invited to give critical feedback in words and drawings about two key aspects of the Yarning Conference, their most significant part of their experience of the learning and what they would like to see happen at their school to show pride and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture.

Darebin Council collated the feedback for each of the schools and returned it to the Principal and teachers of each school as a way of leading future programs in their schools based on student ideas.

- ***Preparing posters/ visuals art works to use as part of their march during the Yarning Conference***

Since 2020, as part of all pre-Conference learning activities, students are encouraged to prepare posters which speak to the NAIDOC themes to use on the march to show support and amplify their voices.

These are seen in use in the photographs of the Yarning Conference of 2022 and 2023, with links in Section 2.

- ***Writing and performing song – Get Up! Stand up! Show up!***

As part of the Pre-Conference learning in 2022, Aboriginal Darebin Council staff member, and musician Uncle James Williams, worked with students of Reservoir East PS (REPS) to write a song to the NAIDOC theme. The students of REPS and Uncle James performed the song at the whole of schools gathering. REPS was chosen as the key schools given the increasing number of Aboriginal students attending the school.

- ***Aboriginal students speaking at the Yarning Conference***

In 2023, Aboriginal students from three Darebin schools, Charles la Trobe PS, Preston North East PS and Reservoir East PS were invited and spoke at the Yarning Conference about what the NAIDOC theme 'For Our Elders' meant to them. They spoke at the whole-of-schools gathering. They were supported by their teachers in the preparation and by the MCs in their presentation.

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c) Schools, program development and selected venues

Here is a summary of schools, students, program development and venues over the six years:

The Aboriginal Advancement League was selected as the initial venue given the deep history of struggle and self-determination of the League.

- 2018 – **12** primary schools with 300 Year 5 students, and 20 supporting students from two secondary schools; held at the Aboriginal Advancement League
- 2019 – **15** primary schools with 320 Year 5 students; held at the Aboriginal Advancement League

During the two years of COVID and all the complexities especially for schools and students, the Yarning Conference continued in an online format.

- 2020 – **17** primary schools with 700+ Year 5 students; held online as a webinar via Zoom, directly to all schools, on one day.
- 2021 - **20** primary schools with 700+ Year 5 students; videos were produced with cultural educators which promoted interactive learning made available for use by the schools across all of Term IV.

In 2022 and 2023, the Yoorrook Justice Commission were invited to speak at the Conference as keynote speakers, along with Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Elders. The Commissioners were not able to attend however key Commission staff including the Directors of Engagement, Support and Communications were able to contribute. The venue for 2022 and 2023 was the Bundoora Park Farm because of the decolonising process of the Farm and surrounding Park, Council is undertaking with Traditional Owners, led by Darebin Council's Aboriginal Partnerships Officer Uncle Stuart McFarlane.

- 2022 – **22** primary schools with 430 Year 5 students; held at Bundoora Park Farm
- 2023 – **20** primary schools with 420 Year 5 students; held at Bundoora Park Farm

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4. Conclusion:

Darebin City Council has the privilege of making this submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission on Education. We have decided to focus on the voices of the children and students who have participated in the Yarning Conferences from 2018 – 2023, as a way of showing how strong, clear, powerful and eloquent the voices of children are for truth-telling and Aboriginal justice – and that the formal education space is central for this learning.

The essential part of making the Yarning Conference a meaningful process of learning is the centring of Cultural advice and the strong partnerships with Aboriginal Elders, educators, advocates and representatives of community-controlled organisations; and building on the commitment and capacities of non-indigenous educators in schools.

The Yarning Conference is one contribution towards supporting schools to embed truth-telling and learning and affirming pride in Aboriginal Culture by all students and educators. This submission shows deep learning and respect for Aboriginal Culture and for a commitment to truth-telling through the voices of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

The following statement and image made by a student in 2022 encapsulates the essence of what drives the ongoing commitment and programming of the Yarning Conferences by everyone involved: IF EDUCATION IS SO IMPORTANT TEACH US THE TRUTH!

A participant at the 2022 Darebin Schools' NAIDOC Yarning Conference sharing her poster with all 430 participating students at the invitation of the MCs, Lena Charles and Sarah Sheridan, Clothing the Gaps.



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