

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

From: Anonymous 479

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Submission:

I am a brave First Nation woman whose family has connection to Wiradjuri country who has lived my whole life on Boon Wurrung/Bunerong country.

School work for me was not difficult as I had natural inclination for academic work. Sometimes confronting was the different cultural norms. Competitive, focus on individuals and a seeming process where the weakest students would either sink or swim. Even though my family didn't explain our Aboriginal heritage and culture to me until I was 20, we have culture and had not labelled it as we didn't need to within our family. It is who we are and how we do things. We had always accepted and supported cousins and younger siblings for who they were and where they were at, supporting them without judgement. In our family it was discouraged to brag about personal strengths instead such abilities is obligation and opportunity for your contribution to the group. I knew my values were not always the same as school way of doing things and as a quiet and observant child I just tried to do my best in different systems between my mums house, dads house and school. Looking back, I was expected to conform to the culture of different environments. It still seems unusual to me that Aboriginal people are the ones expected to identify themselves as different not the other way around.

I was the first person in my entire family to attend university and it was very hard to forge this path. I didn't know what to do or where to go and most other students had parents who had attended Univerwity and supported them. I became a teacher myself in education department schools in Victoria, I witnessed many First Nation students struggle within school norms. A lot of the time I could understand how the school may think the child is displaying challenging behaviour but I could also understand the cultural perspective of the child and that for them the school system had made it difficult for them first. Sometimes their behaviour was a response to cultural discordance. For example sometimes purposefully acting out to deflect shame of a sibling for not being able to do the work asked of them in front of class by a teacher.

I found that the office admin person had a list of Koorie students in schools. So I would find out the First Nation students in schools I worked in and keep eye out for them. Their eyes realise I am looking out for them and their eyes would start to look to me. An invisible and often silent understanding and connection helped many students at least know that someone understood. It is easier to deflect unwanted attention as a teacher, witnessing cultural confronting situations. I found deflecting more effective than calling out racist actions I sometimes saw towards Aboriginal students as it was more likely to curb the teacher behaviour, offer the teacher a way

to do something different next time and the Aboriginal students knew I was sticking up for them without being shamed. If I heard racist comments or jokes without children present I would either say That is not Ok or if too many staff all seeming in agreement then I didn't feel I could turn the tide I would just leave. Removing oneself is a response that means something in my Aboriginal culture ie to see someone unexpectedly leave would make me question if they were ok or if I had done something inappropriate but I expect it went over heads of non-Aboriginal staff laughing in staff room. The one time I felt the assistant principal was targeting an Aboriginal child with behaviour issues by coming to classroom to check with me verbally but in front of the 5 yo Aboriginal child if he had come to school with or without socks to write it down as it was an indication or neglect or if he had brought lunch or just money in a paper bag (so we could make a lunch order for him), I told in front of the child and others that he is a good boy who has done as much work as he can manage and that he has shoes on and that's the main thing and that we don't mind writing out the lunch order as his mum loves him and sent the money and bag for him and that we helped him choose healthy things. We are only as safe as our weakest and the other children were just as relieved as the young boy. That time, I did not get my contract renewed.

When I asked the admin in one school, why they had a list of Aboriginal students they said that there was a small amount of extra funding for these students. I am not sure if this was \$800-\$1600 per student but once I started questioning the conversation was quickly shut down. When I asked at several schools whether this money could be used to run group activities in cultural context for all students such as Reconciliation group or specifically for Aboriginal students to connect with each other, I was told No, that money is absorbed into global budgets as you know the **** family takes up way to much of the Assistant Principals time with behaviour issues and stole the iPads from BER building when the cleaners were in. I was able to run a Kids Teaching Kids program which money came from global budget and I had secret priority to include First Nation children that this opportunity was applicable for in a way to try to make up for the lack of positive support from schools.

As a teacher I am a believer in science of reading approach over Balanced Literacy approach. I believe the balanced literacy approach unfairly disadvantages First Nation Students. Twenty percent of students do not learn to read proficiently under balanced literacy approach. I actually feel that it would be a higher percent for Aboriginal students, in my experience, and I urge you to research this in making recommendations. I know this impacted my daughter. As a teacher with income I was able to supplement learning offered by education department balanced literacy approach myself and with tutoring.

Many children of upper and middle class families do this if their child falls within the 20%. If Aboriginal students are more likely to be impacted by this problem and also statistically more Aboriginal families unlikely to be able to afford tutors, or support education themselves due to their experience at school, then this is a double

whammy. I actually think Balanced Literacy approach is a systematic failure which is beneficial to keeping colonisers on a position of power through reduced access to effective education for students from minority cultures with specific disadvantage to Aboriginal students.

I am a foster mum to my [REDACTED] Aboriginal foster son. I am scared to how he will cope in a school system which uses punitive punishment as a systematic way to attempt to guide behaviour.

He will not respond to this and needs humour, kindness and positive guidance from people he has developed strong connections with to help him build routines and behaviour norms. He will not learn from Balanced aliteracy Approach. Most schools are zoned and this limits or options to find the best fit and most culturally appropriate school for him.

So in my opinion there is still a lot of work to be done. I will continue to work in minimising the impacts of Aboriginal students I am involved in my day to day life as well as advocate in any way possible to call racism out and help contribute to systematic change. Thank you for opportunity to tell our truths.