

Voices of Aboriginal Students from the Eastern Suburbs

The following is a submission from a group of students from the eastern suburbs taken across two sessions on the 18th of April 2024 and the 2nd of May 2024.

Question: How could First Peoples' history and culture be better taught at school?

1. Focus on strengths and the present not just negatives and the past.

- History classes can be very negative (about Stolen Generations, etc) and so repetitive. Why not focus on positives as well? Because so much of it is repeating the same content young people tune out and feel guilt tripped rather than informed.
- And they never talk about solutions. They never talk about the present. It's always the past – murder, rape, etc.
- Teachers mean well – they want to teach accurately - but the curriculum and textbooks are lacking and only talk about the negativity.
- Teachers are scared to push boundaries because the truth is uncomfortable.

2. Improved Training for Teachers

- Better training is needed for history teachers, so they are not accidentally being racist.
- More consultation for the school in general – like PD for teachers around cultural sensitivity. If you teach the teachers it will filter down to the rest of the school.
- Do teachers do enough cultural sensitivity sessions a year, does it make a difference? Do they learn anything new?
- Younger teachers are better than the older ones. Because they've started putting modules in teacher's courses. Knowledge is better now for younger teachers.
- The two big problems we've had with teachers have always been with older white teachers.
- It's hard to deal with older teachers and basically having to wait for them to retire.
- When talking about Indigenous History – make sure you include warnings from teachers and in textbooks about what they're about to see, especially in regard to images of people that have passed. This needs to be done in a cultural safe way.

3. Creative Approaches to Learning:

- Being taken outside on country to see things physically and bringing cultural items and hunting tools helps to make learning easier.
- Being out of the class helps us remember what we're learning.
- I think they should look to have more Elders and indigenous people in schools to teach our history.
- I learnt more about Aboriginal history from my leadership program that included meeting with an Aboriginal Elder taking us outside than I did at school.

4. Build Safe Spaces within the School

- Another good idea we had was to build an indigenous garden and space – but we need funding for it. It should be in a prominent spot not hidden.
- We were also looking to have a culturally safe space in the school – peaceful and quiet, that we can spend time to be in after something has happened, with Aboriginal art. Be good if the space felt purposeful space. Something we could make our own. A space outside from the disruption of other students.

5. Inappropriate comments at school:

- Students using inappropriate language about race – happens a lot. And it's really difficult to call people out because they say, "it's just a joke" or a "just a game".
- Sometimes we have repeating behaviour around racist comments.
- There is lots of bad comments from other students. At the end of the day kids will always be dickheads.
- We recently wanted to do Traditional Games outside in the yard, but we were too worried about what other people would say. We always have to think about what other people will say or think.

- The Acknowledge of Country needs to be stepped up. Sometimes it just doesn't feel meaningful. It's like "it happened, so let's get over it". Sometimes they also include an reference to LGBTQI awareness in the acknowledgement. We think this isn't appropriate and it should be done separately.

- The problem with reporting a teacher for inappropriateness is it's hard to call them out. I'm worried that me reporting them will get me in trouble.
- One good idea is to encourage other kids to report it rather than rely on the Aboriginal kids to report but it is complicated and there are multiple levels to it.

- Once a teacher said to my mum that I didn't know anything about my culture, but the teacher themselves had never asked me. It didn't make me feel good and it upset my mum.
- This group wasn't designed to be a reference group for the school, but we felt pressured to help inform the teachers. It's not kids' jobs to teach teachers this stuff.
- Student was told by another student that 'you should be grateful for colonisation'. And then she continued on because you wouldn't be here without white people because you wouldn't have an education or shopping centres.
- Teacher told me that I should be good at this book because I am Aboriginal and I should know all the answers.
- A kid walked passed me and called me the 'N' word.
- Students have been told 'to go an sniff petrol'
- Someone told me to go back to the bush where I belong
- People got up in class and starting mocking corroboree dances and language
- Someone told me to get up and play the didgeridoo
- Teacher mentioned that the Voice Referendum was a waste of money
- Someone was doing an Acknowledgement of Country and the teacher said 'we should get rid of it, it's a waste of time'
- Often hear negative sentiment about doing an Acknowledgement of Country
- Noticed a teacher laughing during a video with Aboriginal people singing in language
- A teacher wanted us to get a tube thing when we went home and play it like a didgeridoo (after watching a youtube on how to play one). No additional information was provided around cultural knowledge and history.
- A teacher used the N word when talking about drugs. Then students reported that the teacher was referencing Aboriginal people.
- Was told by the same teacher to do more leadership activities as it was important for Aboriginal students to do this. Felt like she was chased around as they wanted more Aboriginal kids to do leadership activities.
- A student was told by another student to change their snapchat avatar to a darker skin tone.

6. Why it is hard to report issues.

- Worried about being known to have reported someone and that would increase backlash from the student or other students.
- Loss of friends and people think you aren't fun if you report racism. You should be better at 'taking jokes'
- Not being taken seriously because I am fair skinned – like it shouldn't be such an issue
- Belief that is nothing going to change if we report things

- Things being used against you if you report it – our responses to racism might be seen as an issue (e.g. calling someone out as racist).
- Feeling anxious about it and fear about reporting and the consequences
- Having consideration for some when you report things (like maybe they didn't mean it).