
Students to be taught about ‘invasion’ experience of First Nations Australians in proposed curriculum changes

By Jordan Baker
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School students will be taught for the first time that First Nations Australians experienced European colonisation as an invasion under proposed changes to the national curriculum.

The changes, released for discussion by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) on Thursday, also said the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous be replaced with First Nations Australians or Australian First Nations Peoples.

They come after the advisory group raised concerns about the “accuracy and adequacy” of the overarching themes of the current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority.

Cross-curriculum priorities are topics that must be taught within all key disciplines, ranging from maths and science to history.

The review found the existing themes did not include enough “truth telling” about the experience of First Nations Australians since European settlement, and put too much emphasis on the period before contact with Europeans.

They failed to recognise that “the First Peoples of Australia experienced colonisation as invasion and dispossession of land, sea and sky,” said a summary of the proposed changes.

They also neglect to mention that Australia is home to the worlds’ oldest continuing culture, and “do not showcase the sophisticated political, economic and social organisations systems of the First Peoples of Australia,” the discussion paper said.

The review proposed that a critical step towards becoming culturally responsive was to acknowledge that the terms “Aboriginal” and indigenous were being imposed without consultation, and “First Nations People” was more widely accepted.

While the present document referred to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities having a special connection to country and place, the new one would say the occupation and colonisation of Australia “were experienced by First Nations Australians as an invasion that denied their occupation of, and connection to, country/place”.

It will also specify that Australia has two distinct First Nations Peoples; Aboriginal Peoples, who have occupied the continent for more than 60,000 years, and Torres Strait Islander People, who have occupied their region for 4000 years.

The changes will be reflected in the history curriculum, with year 4 students learning about the significant experiences of those on the first fleet, and about the effects of contact on First Nations People and how this was perceived by them as an invasion.

In year 9 history, students will learn about different historical interpretations and debates about the colonial and settler societies, such as contested terms including colonisation, settlement and invasion.

Mark Rose, the pro vice-chancellor of indigenous strategy at Deakin University, chairs the indigenous advisory committee at ACARA. He said children should be taught about different perspectives.

“We do it not because we’re pandering to a minority and we’re politically correct,” he said. “We think embedded in indigenous knowledge for all kids is an ability to anchor themselves in competing world views.

“The kid sitting on the reading mat today is going to face a world with multiple world views, with changes to world powers, and indigenous knowledges - by putting through different ways of seeing the world - will give kids a real advantage.

“It’s a reality for our kids. Some people will find it may be controversial, but if you peel back our society, there are four faces of this nation. We have a colonial past, which is significant and should be in the curriculum.

“We are part of Asia. We are one of the world’s most multicultural nations. And we house the world’s longest-living continuous culture. If those four faces are not represented, we are doing our kids a disservice.”

The chief executive of ACARA, David de Carvalho, said the revisions gave students the chance to discuss and understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, such as how the arrival of the First Fleet was perceived.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ experiences and perspectives are part of Australia’s past and present reality, but they do not invalidate other perspectives and experiences,” he said in a statement.

“‘Perspectives’ and ‘interpretation’ are core concepts in the study of history, used to identify the essential content students should learn.”

In 2016, then-prime minister Malcolm Turnbull said the colonisation of Australia could fairly be described as an invasion. “The facts are very well known,” he said. “This country was Aboriginal land. It was occupied by Aboriginal people for tens of thousands of years.”