The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the Australian National Curriculum: A cultural, cognitive and socio-political evaluation

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Abstract

THE ANALYSIS PRESENTED in this paper is an evaluation of the specific tagged 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' content as described in course Content Descriptions and Elaborations in each of the first four ACARA curriculum documents. The analysis is in three forms: 1) a multilayered cultural analysis based on work by Grant and Yunkaporta; 2), an analysis based on Bloom's revised taxonomy of the cognitive expectations of student learning embedded within each curriculum document; and 3) an analysis of the learning opportunities provided to students across a range of significant socio-political issues. The findings of this initial analysis raises serious questions about ACARA's assertion that they intend to provide all students with the opportunities to develop a deep understanding of the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The paper argues that there appears to be a clear lack of intention on ACARA's part to engage fully with the potential of the Australian Curriculum to integrate high-quality learning around the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

1. Context—The Australian Curriculum and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has as its statutory remit, the development of Foundation to Year 10 curriculum for the four learning areas of English, Mathematics, Science and History. This was undertaken in collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including state and territory school systems and curriculum authorities, teachers, parents, key industry bodies, and key peak bodies, including those representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Though consultations were held through the various phases of curriculum development, it was seen that the many issues identified by Aboriginal educators in these forums about the quality, substance and form of 'Aboriginal content' was either largely ignored, or addressed through the addition of additional non-mandatory content to the *Content Elaborations*. These responses by ACARA proved to be a significant impetus for this three-way analysis of the embedded cross curriculum content within the first four national curriculum documents.

ACARA has acknowledged that the Australian Curriculum must be relevant to the lives of all students, and address the many contemporary issues that students face. The development of the Australian Curriculum has been taking place over three broad phases, guided by two key documents: the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) and *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). The *Melbourne Declaration* sets out in the broadest terms the purpose and outcomes of schooling and post-secondary education; whilst the *Shape Paper* provides a background for the development and implementation of the first draft of Foundation to Year 10 courses that will make up the Australian Curriculum.

The *Shape Paper* identified that one of the priority areas to be addressed across all curriculum areas is the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. To this end, ACARA published *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Curriculum Cross-curriculum Priorities* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011) statement, which provides a conceptual framework which curriculum writers would use to embed learning experiences to allow all students to develop an understanding of the historical and contemporary lives, histories and cultures of Aboriginal people. ACARA argued that this is necessary in order to:

> ensure that all young Australians will be given the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, their significance for Australia and the impact these have had, and continue to have, on our world. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011, p. 22)

The undertaking given by ACARA in the *Shape Paper* was translated into a draft document on the place of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curriculum priority within the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2011a). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures priorities paper provided a rationale and framework for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' sense of identity and culture, within the three themes: People, Culture and Country and Place. These ideas were then developed into three 'Organising Ideas', with each in turn being expanded into three interrelated content areas. This it was claimed would guide the development of integrated and responsive teaching across the initial courses in English (ACARA, 2011e), Mathematics (ACARA, 2011c), Science (ACARA, 2011d) and History (ACARA, 2011b).

For that document to meet the stated purpose of providing a structural tool for embedding specific content, it had to be completed in time to influence the development and writing of curriculum. Consultation on the Cross-curriculum Priorities document was still continuing in late 2011—as ACARA was well aware long after the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) had endorsed both the curriculum Content Descriptions in December 2010, and Course Achievement Standards in October 2011. This inability to complete the Cross-curriculum Priorities document before the initial completion phase of curriculum development critically impacted ACARA's capacity to strategically scope the embedding of authentic curriculum content responsive to histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ACARA's tardiness in completing this document demonstrates a level of disingenuousness about not only their own curriculum development processes, but also their stated commitment to collaborate with all stakeholders in all phases of their work (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011).

The analysis presented in this paper is a three-level evaluation of the specific tagged 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' content in each of the first four ACARA curriculum documents. It is based on an investigation of the curriculum content found in both Content Descriptions and Elaborations. The analysis is in three forms: 1) a multilayered cultural analysis based on work by Grant (1998) and Yunkaporta (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009; Yunkaporta & NSW Department of Education and Communities – Western Region); 2) an analysis based on Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2000; Krathwohl, 2002) of the cognitive expectations of student learning embedded within the learning statements of the four initial Foundation to Year 10 curriculum documents; and 3) an analysis of the learning opportunities provided to students, to expose them to the range of significant socio-political issues that represent significant turning points in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The authors examined the assertion given by ACARA that it would provide opportunities for all students to develop a deeper understanding of the

cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These have been mapped to key social and historical concepts that have been written into the documents in order to analyse the inclusion of those events and issues that represent key elements of the 'histories' of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This evaluation investigates whether this content is explicitly identified and if so, to what extent, in order to ascertain the depth of knowledge, skills and understanding to which students will be exposed.

The findings of this initial analysis raises serious questions about both the accuracy and genuineness of ACARA's claim that they intend to provide all students with the opportunities to develop a deep understanding of the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We would argue there appears to be a clear lack of will, ability, or intention, on ACARA's part to engage fully with the potential of the Australian Curriculum to integrate high-quality learning around the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a failure to adequately address the very issues and concepts that ACARA itself identified as being central to the development of student learning.

Postscript

During 2012, ACARA released two further versions of its initial four curriculum documents, and though it is not the intention of the authors to evaluate, in this paper, the largely minor changes made to both Content Descriptions in Versions 3 and 4.1, a brief review of these amended curricula confirms that little has changed in the critical areas investigated in this paper. Of interest to the authors was whether additional content, in the form of Content Descriptions, evidenced a change in ACARA's thinking on how it intends to situate Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the Australian Curriculum. We would suggest that, while the overall quantum of references increased, the more critical question is whether additional 'Aboriginal content' evidences a significant correction to the curriculum, or whether it is a disingenuous attempt by ACARA to placate the concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and some teachers, by adding to the overall volume of content, while failing to address the cognitive, social, epistemological or ontological weaknesses identified in earlier consultations. Our view is that little has changed, and we are inclined to the latter interpretation, not the former.

2. Cultural appraisal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the Australian Curriculum

An Indigenous cultural analysis tool

In seeking to undertake an analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the Australian Curriculum, a cultural matrix tool is proposed to measure both the breadth of content and depth of perspective. For *breadth and integrity* of Aboriginal content, we have employed Uncle Dr Ernie Grant's Indigenous framework from Cape York (Grant, 1998). It comprises six elements, as indicated in Table 1.

For *depth* of Aboriginal perspectives, four elements of Aboriginal epistemology/ontology from the Department of Education and Communities' (DEC) Western Region Aboriginal pedagogy framework, *8ways* (Yunkaporta, 2009) has been used: see Figure 1. This framework is increasingly informing program development and teaching practice in schools across New South Wales (Yunkaporta & NSW Department of Education and Communities – Western Region). The elements used here are not the pedagogies themselves, but the four elements identified as aspects of Aboriginal ways of valuing, being, doing and knowing (which relate to Indigenous perspectives, rather than Indigenised content).

Table 1. Cultural matrix to measure breadth of content and depth of perspective

Land	Language	Culture
Time	Place	Relationships

Figure 1. *8ways* pedagogical framework (Yunkaporta, 2009)

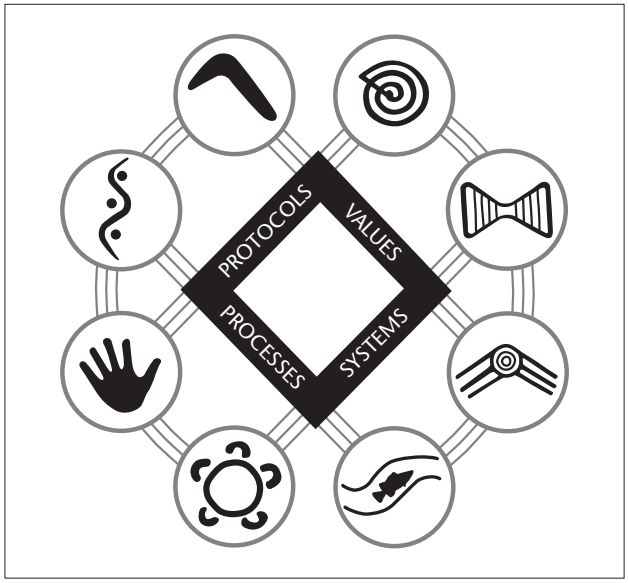

Table 2. Analysis matrix combining elements from Table 1 and Figure 1

	Protocols	Values	Processes	Systems
Land				
Language				
Culture				
Time				
Place				
Relationships				

These four elements comprise the columns of the matrix and the six elements of Dr Grant's Indigenous framework form the rows (Table 2).

The presence of tangible items of Aboriginal culture and history in the Australian Curriculum is not in question. However, these do not necessarily represent Aboriginal perspectives. Indigenous 'ways of knowing, being and thinking' are flagged as 'key concepts' in the curriculum documents; however, these are intangible aspects of culture that cannot be represented by mere cultural and historical facts or items. Rather, they can be found in Indigenous protocols, values, processes and systems, as represented in Table 2.

Mapping Indigenous knowledge

For the purposes of this appraisal, *ways of being* are regarded as axiology and ontology, represented by the perspective descriptors *Values and Protocols*. Ways of knowing are regarded as epistemologies, represented by the perspective descriptor *Systems*. *Ways of thinking* are regarded as cognition and practical methodology, represented by the perspective descriptor *Processes*.

The content descriptor *Land* encompasses perspectives on landscape, nature and natural phenomena. *Language* refers to perspectives on contemporary and historical communication forms. *Culture* refers to both tangible and intangible aspects of lived realities and expressions of ways of being, knowing and thinking. *Time* refers to perspectives on sequencing, chronology, temporal realities and cause-and-effect relationships. *Place* refers to the narrative, ritual and cultural meanings enfolded in spaces and landscapes through long-term occupancy and custodianship of land. The category *Relationships* refers to perspectives on the dynamic interaction between all the other elements, and the connections within and between human, spiritual and ecological systems.

Overall, this cultural analysis tool is a way of determining the presence—or lack—of the intangible cultural elements, specifically ways of knowing, being and thinking, that are flagged as key elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum documents. The objective is to determine whether cultural *perspectives* (not just cultural *items* viewed from non-Aboriginal perspectives) are included in the curriculum, and to measure the depth and breadth of cultural integrity expressed by these perspectives.

Overall results of cultural analysis

A search for the keyword 'Aboriginal' in the Australian Curriculum website resulted in 142 matches, from which it was determined that 52 items actually dealt with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander concept of culture. Of these 52 items, many included examples in which there was a choice between Asian or other cultures rather than an Aboriginal focus for study. Only five examples of Aboriginal perspective items were included as Content Description (CD). Most items were content Elaborations (E), and are thus not considered as core content (Table 3).

Many of the Aboriginal perspectives items, even in the most basic 'processes' column, seemed to deal more with simple factual content rather than Aboriginal ways of thinking and doing. However, they may still have the potential for classes to explore as Indigenous processes rather than basic information seen from a non-Indigenous perspective, particularly if teachers genuinely choose to 'elaborate' on the content by providing students with deeper learning experiences. The use of the word 'choose' is important here, since the Elaborations developed for each of the Content Descriptions are not part of the core or mandated content. This sends the message to teachers that they are not required to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, knowing

Table 3. Cultural analysis of curriculum documents

	Values	Protocols	Systems	Processes	**Total**
Land	E1		CD1, E1	CD1, E3	**7**
Language			E1	E6	**7**
Culture	E1		E9	E15	**25**
Time			E3		**3**
Place				CD1	**1**
Relationships	E1	E1	CD1, E2	CD1, E3	**9**
Total	**3**	**1**	**18**		**52**

and thinking in any content that has been mapped as Content Elaborations. This appears to have been left to the teacher's discretion—an approach that is at odds with the policy requirement that mandates the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives.

Content descriptors

Almost half of the items in Table 3 (25 of 52) fall under the descriptor Culture and mostly dealt with tangible aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material culture, history and pre-invasion tradition which most likely would be viewed from a non-Indigenous anthropological perspective if left to teacher discretion. The lowest-scoring descriptor was Place. There were seven items pertaining to the Language descriptor, representing elements of dialects of English or Indigenous expression in English literature, or Aboriginal (and international) vocabulary that has become part of Standard Australian English. Content descriptors that registered in the Values column were Land, Culture and Relationships, the latter being the one example where ACARA has developed a range of content across all four-perspective descriptors.

Perspective descriptors

Overall, only four items deal explicitly with Aboriginal ways of being, as indicated in the Values and Protocols columns in Table 3, under the content descriptors Land, Culture and Relationships, including Indigenous orientations to concepts of leadership and social organisation. Notably absent are Ethics and Law: the very elements that could inform student behaviour, high expectations and school–community relationships.

Of the 52 Indigenous perspective items, 18 appear under the Systems descriptor, which pertains to ways of knowing. Nine of these belong to the Culture descriptor, while the rest are distributed across Land, Language, Time and Relationships. Deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems here could present schools with the potential to enrich programs with place-based local frameworks for knowledge transmission that are intellectually rigorous as well as culturally appropriate.

While public education is a long way from engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies in this way, we would nevertheless argue for the desirability of a forward-looking Australian Curriculum in this respect, making provision for the professional educators and researchers who are currently striving to develop this kind of innovative practice and meaningful engagement with cultural knowledge pedagogy.

The highest-scoring perspective descriptor was Processes, with a total of 30 out of 52 items. Processes pertain to ways of thinking and doing. As previously identified, the items included were given the benefit of the doubt in terms of their potential to deliver on actual ways of thinking or doing, rather than just the transmission and recall of basic cultural or historical facts. If these items were presented in a way that demanded application and transfer of Aboriginal ways of thinking and doing to a variety of contexts and disciplines, then the potential for inclusion of these perspectives in areas of mainstream content would be markedly increased. One advantage of this kind of inclusion is that if Aboriginal perspectives were delivered across the curriculum as ways knowing and doing within the curriculum Content Descriptions (rather than only as additional content) then concerns about diminished space for mainstream content could be neutralised.

3. Cognitive analysis of the content in the Australian Curriculum

Evaluation taxonomy

Not only are there concerns raised about the depth and breadth of ACARA's curriculum engagement with Indigenous culture and knowledge, but there is also concern that the descriptions of the curriculum items embed low-level cognitive expectations on student learning. Strauss (2000) defined curriculum as the manifestation of an intellectual construct about the nature of course content, students' understanding of that content, and students' cognitive development. It is argued that this allows teachers to construct learning experiences for students based on their understanding of the domain content, on a perception of students' cognitive development based in part on teacher expectations of student capacity, and the explicit level of cognition specified within the curriculum itself.

It is this nexus between the ascribed level of cognition within the curriculum content, and the specifically tagged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content that is the focus of this study. The analysis draws on the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2000) to attain an understanding of the minimum cognitive requirements of this content and to ascertain an understanding of its potential impact on student achievement of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As in Bloom's original cognitive taxonomy published in the 1950s, the revised taxonomy is a hierarchy based on six categories of cognitive process dimensions. While there are a number of significant changes in the new taxonomy, it remains conceptually similar to that developed by Bloom in 1956 (Amer, 2006), with the integrity of the taxonomy continuing to rest on the understanding that the six cognitive dimensions move from a lesser to greater cognitive complexity, and that this evolving complexity impacts on teacher's pedagogic practices as they engage in designing teaching programs (Raths, 2002).

Simply stated, the revised Bloom's taxonomy categorises thinking skills from the concrete to the abstract. The lowest three levels of the cognitive domain taxonomy are *remembering*, *understanding* and *applying*, while the higher three levels are *analysing*, *evaluating* and *creating*. Within this framework, there is an implied correlation between the order of skills required to achieve the level of learning, and the expectations placed on the learner. It is argued that effective learning builds on what the learner knows, allowing them to move towards acquiring new knowledge, skills and understanding. Recognising the potential of this cognitive hierarchy enables teachers to develop programs underpinned by content that reinforces higher learning expectations and deepens understanding (Anderson et al., 2000).

The use of Bloom's taxonomy in the analysis of the explicitly identified cognitive requirements in the Australian Curriculum is supported by its broad-based acceptance within education, in identifying the cognitive strengths of student learning embedded in both curriculum and assessment (Näsström, 2009). The taxonomy, which is a schema for classifying educational goals, objectives, and educational standards, provides an organisational structure that applies a commonly understood meaning to the specific learning objectives in the curriculum. It is argued that when considered in tandem with the previous cultural analysis, it is possible to use the taxonomy to achieve a clear, concise visual understanding (Krathwohl, 2002) of the ACARA content as it aligns to educational standards and goals, objectives and their actualisation as teaching programs and activities (Forehand, 2005).

The four ACARA curriculum documents were analysed to obtain an indication of the level of knowledge and cognitive processes explicitly required by the ACARA curriculum. It is important to note that, at a minimum, teachers are expected to develop teaching programs based on these learning requirements. We realise and acknowledge that many teachers will, of course, teach beyond the specific cognitive expectations in the curriculum, just as they might in any other subject if it is of particular interest to them, but this cannot be expected or taken for granted. Consequently, this analysis is of the curriculum as it is described within the course Content Descriptions and Elaborations.

The link between curriculum content and teaching and learning specifically extends to the assessment of curriculum content knowledge, skills and understanding. The development of achievement standards, which is based on these content Elaborations, compounds the impact on student learning, because not only are teachers' programs informed by this content, but student achievement will also be reported against achievement statements developed from the very same course content.

Discussion

A search of the four curriculum areas revealed 142 instances of the word 'Aboriginal' across the four syllabus documents, falling to 83 discrete items when the ACARA *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross-curriculum Priorities* tag was applied. A summary of the analysis of the items is shown in Table 4, which maps the cognitive elements from the revised taxonomy that appear in the curriculum for each year of schooling. The number of items in each cell of the table represents the total number of key verbs found in the entire curriculum Content Descriptions and Elaborations that indicate the level of cognitive abstraction required to achieve the designated learning outcome in a particular school year.

Of the 83 items, 64 fell within the three cognitive dimensions *remembering*, *understanding* and *applying*. Verbs such as 'identify', 'recall', 'recognise', 'research', 'investigate' and 'classify' were used to describe the level of cognitive engagement, indicating to the teacher that the teaching and learning experiences in those areas have particular cognitive expectations of what is required of students to learn, know or do. While it is appropriate to cognitively scaffold student learning as students progress through their learning to support their engagement with new knowledge and skills, it is also essential that students are empowered to construct their own learning by being challenged to 'achieve new understanding and knowledge through accessing challenging higher-order learning (Roelofs & Terwel, 1999). Curriculum has a powerful role in supporting teachers to develop quality-learning experiences by clearly describing a range of content that embeds high order learning outcomes (Hattie, 2005).

An analysis of the cognitive expectations within the English and History curricula shows that there has been an attempt to direct students to 'examine', 'question' and 'compare', all of which sit within the *analysing* dimension of the taxonomy. It should be noted that in the History curriculum ACARA has used concepts rather than descriptive verbs to identify the level of intended cognitive engagement, necessitating a modified analytical approach compared to the other three documents, which has made the drawing of conclusions based upon a direct comparison between all four curricula somewhat problematic.

The analysis of both the History and English curricula shows that the majority of content occurs in the primary years, particularly in Year 4, as there are only 18 items out of 83 that have been written for Years 7 to 10. The lack of balance in the placement of content fuels concerns about the curriculum embedding low cognitive requirements, as it is mainly in the secondary years that students are provided with opportunities to hone critical capacities that are supported through high-order learning.

The targeted content in the Science curriculum has been written for inclusion in both primary and secondary years, but in all instances the content is pitched at the lowest *understanding* level. Learning at this level typically requires students to 'acquire' or develop an 'understanding' of concepts through 'considering', 'researching', 'investigating' and/or 'explaining' the technologies and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The weakness of this content is that it provides little opportunity for teachers to extend student learning, or broaden their cognitive engagement. Similarly,

Table 4. Summary of an analysis of all Phase 1 content in the ACARA curriculum

Bloom's cognitive dimension / Year	F	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	**Totals**
Remembering	2	1										**3 (4%)**
Understanding	4	2	8	7	7	5	8	3	3		4	**51 (61%)**
Applying		1	1	2	1	1		1	2		1	**10 (12%)**
Analysing		1	2		7		1				3	**14 (17%)**
Evaluating				1			1				1	**3 (4%)**
Creating		1		1								**2 (2%)**
Total	**6**	**6**	**11**	**11**	**15**	**6**	**10**	**4**	**5**	**0**	**9**	**83**

the curriculum does little to provide teachers with content that would enable them to explore with students both the social context in which knowledge is developed, and the possibility that Indigenous knowledge has its own ontological validity that is independent of that of the 'hard' sciences.

Of the four courses, the Mathematics curriculum is the most limited in content that addresses an Aboriginal perspective. Of the few content examples that are included, five are situated in the primary years and, as in Science, are located at the *understanding* level within the taxonomy. The only two Content Elaborations in the secondary curriculum appear in the analysis of statistics and data in Year 10, where students are asked to mathematically compare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations with the Australian population as a whole. There is no embedded expectation on teachers to provide an opportunity for students to engage in any critical analyse that would lead to an informed understanding why such a statistical discrepancy exists between data sets for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We would suggest that these sequences of learning exemplify the larger argument of how the ACARA curriculum development process has embedded a deficient understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their experiences and their epistemologies—through both the choice of content, and the underpinning level of learning cognition identified within that content.

Overall, there is a significant disparity between both the quantity and the quality of the cognitive learning embedded in the curriculum content, with the stated intention that students should develop a deep understanding of the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is compounded by the disconnect between the coherence of learning between the primary and secondary years, with 65 out of the 83 instances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content occurring across Foundation to Year 6. We would suggest that the impact of these limited learning opportunities at secondary level minimises the capacity of the curriculum to fully develop students' engagement in higher-order learning at a time when they reach greater cognitive maturity and capacity to participate in complex and integrated learning.

The analysis of the cognitive requirements of the four syllabuses demonstrates that 68 items of content have been embedded in lower-order outcomes found in the *remembering*, *understanding* and *applying* dimensions. While acknowledging that learning across Foundation to Year 10 should be written to draw on prior knowledge, and should scaffold student learning to achieve the grounding of foundational knowledge and skills, it is expected that at each stage of learning they are also exposed to higher levels of knowledge, understanding and skills, and develop deeper understanding of more complex curriculum outcomes and content. Effective teaching practice, based on a high-quality curriculum, should inform student learning and assessment by incorporating content that requires teachers to work with students in those cognitive domains that require them move towards higher order learning. For the acquisition of curriculum knowledge and understanding to evolve across the years of learning, it would be expected that the curriculum would ensure that students were provided with ever-richer opportunities as they moved through their secondary education. This analysis highlights that only four items of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in Years 7 to 10 were written for the more cognitively challenging levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

The level of disconnect between the aspirations expressed in the *Shape Paper* and the reality evidenced within the ACARA curriculum, reveals an unwillingness to translate these aspirations into a quality curriculum.

The mapping of the embedded cognitive requirements of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross-curriculum Priorities in the Australian Curriculum* denotes a consistent lack of rigour in both the scope and depth of cognitive engagement across the Foundation to Year 10 curriculum. The mapping of the mandatory Content Descriptions and depth studies, and the optional Elaborations demonstrates that there are few opportunities for teachers to engage students in explicit teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. We would suggest that students are not being enabled to critique their own contemporary environment, or develop informed judgements about the place that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have within the broader 'Australian' body politic in which they and both communities co-exist.

4. Socio-political analysis of key terms in the Australian curriculum

One of the core aspects of the state's control of education is its capacity to initiate the development of curriculum. One aspect of this control is the power vested in state to ensure that national cultural and historical discourses supportive of its histories and aspirations are entrenched as core content in state or national curriculum. These discourses normalise agreed national 'realities' by embedding privileged 'canonical' knowledge in ways that provide teachers with little opportunity to develop teaching which challenges its nature, form, context or bias (Apple, 1995; McMurchy-Pinkington, Pikiao & Rogomai, 2008) or their relationship to state-supported sectional interests (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood & Park, 2005; Pinar, 1993; Said, 1993). This analysis identifies the extent to which ACARA has constructed the learning process, such that students are enabled to meaningfully engage in, oppositional discourses about the development and maintenance of state authority over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This evaluation of the ACARA curriculum aims to investigate the curriculum's engagement with those key discourses that describe the historical and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their socio-political, legal and economic interaction with the state. These provide teachers and students with a common framework and language with which to create a shared meaning from events and policies that have fashioned national, local and family histories, and which have affected relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. The conceptual analysis enables an insight into how students can be exposed to learning to achieve an informed understanding of issues and events that are representative of the socio-political divide that still exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Standfield, 2004).

Table 5. Summary of social and political content in the ACARA curriculum documents

Social justice area / Year	F	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	**Total**
Aboriginal rights							2				3	**5**
Invasion										1		**1**
Colonisation					2					1		**3**
Aboriginal languages	1				1							**2**
Reconciliation				1								**1**
Assimilation							1					**1**
Stolen generation							1				1	**2**
Social justice											1	**1**
Aboriginal identity			1		1				1			**3**
'Terra Nullius'												**0**
Aboriginal self-determination												**0**
Aboriginal autonomy												**0**
Aboriginal sovereignty												**0**
Colonialism												**0**
Land rights												**0**
Racism												**0**
Total	**1**	**0**	**1**	**1**	**4**	**0**	**10**	**4**	**1**	**2**	**5**	**19**

Note: Mid grey highlights those years where there is no mention of any of these elements.
Dark grey highlights those concepts where there is no direct identified curriculum content.
Paler grey highlights where there are two or fewer tagged content statements attached to this year of learning.

Discussion

The information in Table 5 was obtained from a word-and-phrase search of the four relevant ACARA curriculum documents. In some cases the search terms had to be manipulated to locate content for terms such as 'social justice' and 'Aboriginal rights'. Consequently, Table 5 may not be a definitive list of all possible relevant content, but is indicative of the general placement of content specific to these terms within each document. The items assessed in this evaluation were generated from a scan of the glossaries in current New South Wales syllabuses, and represent a smaller but indicative listing of the historical and contemporary issues addressed within current state curricula.

Research from a variety of educational jurisdictions in both Australia and overseas has shown that it is possible to teach social justice outcomes by providing all students with opportunities to develop an understanding of the historical and ongoing impact of the social, political, legal and religious oppression of minority students and their communities. It has been shown that there are both personal and broader social benefits that accrue to students exposed to explicit and purposeful teaching about social justice, with students more likely to perform well at school and be better adjusted socially (A. M. Banks & Banks, 1995; J. A. Banks, 2010). In essence, an education that primarily serves the interests of the dominant section or culture creates a context in which schools are unlikely to acknowledge let alone embrace the equal rights of minority students, their cultural knowledge or historical, social and cultural background and experiences.

McCarthy et al. (2005) noted that, in America, those entrusted with the responsibility of curriculum development have continued to take a conservative position that denies the 'teeming multiplicity' of the world that sits outside the school gates, preferring instead to perpetuate the myth of cultural homogeneity and social normalisation (p. 156). The failure of the Australian Curriculum to provide support for teachers to construct student learning to illuminate these contentious issues ensures that major areas of historical and contemporary national public policy vis-à-vis Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remains largely uncontested within the curriculum. Indifference to these issues denies all students the opportunity to be informed about those socio-political discourses that have forged the environment in which Aboriginal people exist in Australia today. Further, not only does this failure affect all students' learning opportunities, but also, in particular, it denies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their communities the ability to interrogate within an educational environment, the historical, social, political and economic circumstances of their disenfranchisement from the state. It is, in fact, arguable that ACARA has essentially perpetuated the long tradition of curriculum jurisdictions within Australia, in developing an un-problematised, anglo-centric version of history and social experience, through the processes of sanitising and limiting the corpus of 'significant' events through which students are invited to explore the nation's 'shared history' with its Indigenous peoples.

Evidence continues to mount that Indigenous communities are victims of a systemically supported amnesia of the importance of home cultures and languages to a student's wellbeing, and a failure to address the impact of linguistic and cultural stereotyping and racism on students and their communities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009). It has been noted that the level of cultural and linguistic dissonance between Indigenous peoples and mainstream education is such that, without direct and sustained intervention in both the curriculum and pedagogic domains, these deeply embedded biases will continue to affect the educational opportunities of minority students (Kanu, 2007).

A key element in developing a culturally responsive pedagogy is a high-quality curriculum from which teachers can be guided in developing structured learning experiences (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). It is our contention that the capacity of teachers to develop a contextual and responsive learning environment will be significantly determined by the manner in which the Australian Curriculum is constructed, and whether it directs high-level learning opportunities that are situated in meaningful ways that are culturally appropriate to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Analysis

Table 5 shows the quantum and sequencing of the key social, political and legal issues that define, shape and explain the social, political, economic and legal agendas that have impacted on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This evaluation

focused on the inclusion of these 15 identified key social justice concepts within the Phase 1 ACARA curriculum documents.

Table 5 indicates where this content has been mapped. It clearly identifies that, in areas for which content *has* been written, none appears in more than two of the potential 11 school years from Foundation to Year 10 for which these courses have been written. The exception is the concept of '*Aboriginal identity*', where items have been included in Years 2, 4 and 8. It is notable that the Year 10 Depth Study in History is the one instance in which students are provided an option to study the push for acceptance and access to human rights and freedoms in the post-WW II period. However, even at the Year 10 level, the cognitive level of this content is limited in both its scope and depth. The curriculum has been written to provide little opportunity for students to explore Aboriginal peoples' own agency in challenging systemic racism, or the counter efforts of government to deny, limit, remove or deny citizenship or human rights from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The low-level learning attached to the content further weakens the potential of this study. Of the five Elaborations within this depth study, three have been written at the *understanding* level, while the other two ask students to *analyse* the consequences of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples. The opportunity to interrogate the commonalities of the Indigenous experience across nations, of invasion and colonisation, is left unexplored other than for a reference in the Year 9 topic on '*nation making*', and the '*intended* and *unintended*' consequences of '*contact*' on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Even a generous interpretation of this view of history by teachers would not provide students with an informed understanding of the effects of colonisation, or of the similarities between the colonial power's justifications for annexation, loss of sovereignty, and the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their Country.

Omissions

The omission of many of the key concepts identified in the analysis tests the claim by ACARA that the curriculum provides all Australian students with the capacity to develop a deep understanding of the experiences, histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There appears to be an absence of content that would enable students to explore many of the significant social justice issues that have impacted on the daily lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Key concepts such as native title rights to ancestral land, self-determination, social agency, and collective resistance to the range of government policies and/or the long-term effects of colonisation remain largely hidden from student inquiry.

We would argue that Australian Curriculum has failed to provide students with the learning opportunities to examine past and ongoing conflicts over the right to land, appraise and evaluate the statutory and judicial processes of the state that denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples sovereign legal rights to Country, or appreciate that our cultural practices are representative of unique epistemologies. While constructs such as 'invasion' 'sovereign rights' or 'treaties' are obviously too challenging to the vision of benign colonial integration, we are intrigued that students are not given an opportunity to explore the notion of 'social justice' within the construct of social policy making in Australia vis-à-vis Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We would suggest that unpacking this concept would provide a key framework for school discussion on the levels of social, economic and political disengagement seen in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is difficult to explain why such fundamental concepts are neither represented nor challenged in a contemporary curriculum designed to prepare students for the complex, interconnected world that fashions many students' social experiences.

5. Conclusion

The ACARA *Shape Paper* promised much in regard to both the quality and scope of content. The hope was that the Australian Curriculum would underpin opportunities for all students to develop deep knowledge and understanding of the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, it is clear from this analysis that in each of the initial Phase 1 courses, ACARA has failed to fulfil this promise. It would appear that the opportunity is fast evaporating to develop a quality curriculum that would advance a deep understanding of the histories and cultures of Indigenous Australia. The questionable level of cultural inclusivity afforded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is compounded by low learning expectations, underpinned by inadequate attention to cognitive engagement of student learning and a minimal

inclusion of key social concepts and issues. It would be fair to summarise the current inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content as weak, often tokenistic and overwhelmingly unresponsive to historical and contemporary realities. It is regrettable that the states, territories and Commonwealth failed to ensure that ACARA postponed the final signoff of these curriculum documents until such time as they were modified to take these and similar issues into account. Instead, these flawed documents have passed to school systems and teachers to develop curriculum that addresses authentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. Though many embraced the prospect of a national curriculum written in the spirit of Prime Minister Rudd's acknowledgement in 2008 of past and continuing injustices to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ACARA has shunned the opportunity afforded it to reposition curricula as a source of social and political discourse surrounding the shared histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

This failure is remarkably similar to the failed efforts to develop more inclusive curriculum 20 years earlier. Rizvi and Crowley (1993) had observed that curriculum developers generally lacked the will, or the courage, to face the challenge of building key national documents that were responsive to the socio-economic context of students' actual lives and experiences. A consequence of ignoring the social realities of students in the 21st century is that the new curricula fosters a skewed learning environment in which areas of contemporary social history are 'whitewashed' simply by being largely left out of the privileged content of a national curriculum. McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood & Park (2005) also noted, that the process of curriculum development that has largely failed to acknowledge the social and cultural identities of ethnic minorities within the multicultural state is primarily a consequence of the controls exerted by the state over the construction of curriculum. They argued that the process of including only that content that privileges the epistemological and ontological experiences of the colonising cultures over those of the Indigenous peoples is part of a larger colonialist project that has consistently sought to limit the opportunities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to interrogate the lived experiences of both the colonised and coloniser populations.

In its attempt to legitimise the Eurocentric cultural and historical perspectives, ACARA has fallen well short of its own stated goals, and responsibilities to provide the content needed by teachers to address the points of tension between the divergent positions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Instead, ACARA has timidly opted to shift this responsibility to the often ill-resourced classroom teacher who, unsupported by the curriculum, must now attempt to create an intelligible, sequenced and contextual learning experience for all students. We acknowledge that, while many teachers will continue as they have in the past, to provide students with these learning experiences, this should surely be supported by an explicit, high-quality curriculum instead of curriculum serendipity. What is clearly lacking from ACARA is the sense of a learning entitlement that would provide all students with opportunities to be informed about the nature and form of the shared and parallel histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011, p. 7).

While ACARA has a stated intention of ensuring "that all young Australians will be given the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures", (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011), it has been argued here that this has patently not been achieved. We suggest that these intentions have not translated well into the four curriculum documents, either in quality or in substance. There is scant evidence that what little material has been included has been adequately scoped across the years of learning, or cognitively matched to its intended purpose. The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that the curriculum content does not provide teachers with the necessary tools to construct learning experiences that would provide students with the depth and breadth of content needed to acquire a deep knowledge and understanding of the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their significance within the Australian state.

We would strongly urge ACARA to establish a panel of Indigenous academics with demonstrated expertise in curriculum design and development, cognitive development, and Indigenous epistemology and ontology, to undertake a thorough re-appraisal of the national curricula in line with the

stated intentions as set out within the *Shape Paper* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). We would also urge the state and territory educational authorities to establish long-term plans to assist teachers develop teaching and assessment strategies that embed quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content across the curriculum.

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