On Friday 10 January 2014 Education Minister Christopher Pyne formally announced a review of the inaugural Australian curriculum. In his three and half minute televised justification, Pyne (2014) identified a number of criticisms of the national curriculum document, including the ‘necessity to have themes’ of ‘Australia’s place in Asia, Indigenous Australia and sustainability’. It is the second of these themes that we consider as ALEA’s Hot Topic for March 2014. We respond to Pyne’s momentary musing of the necessity of the ‘Indigenous Australian’ theme in the Australian Curriculum with a particular focus on the discipline of English. In the nomenclature of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority’s Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2013), we are of course referring to the ‘cross curriculum priority’ of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures’.

In Australia, the context in which we each undertake our work as English Curriculum and Literacy educationalists and researchers, the 1991 Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody provided the impetus for a more overt reconciliation process (Reconciliation Australia, 2012). Despite guarded optimism from multiple quarters, it still took 17 years for one of the most fundamental reconciliation events to occur; a newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, publically apologised to Australia’s first nations people on behalf of the Australian Government and the Australian people for physical and symbolic violence committed from the mid-1800s through to the 1970s. We are now six years post-apology and the reconciliation agenda has been pushed into schools. All teachers have been called on to take responsibility for facilitating the move towards a new national order through curriculum reform. The recently introduced Australian Curriculum mandates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are embedded, albeit with ‘a strong but varying presence’, into each learning area (ACARA, 2013).

Decisions about the specifics of content (‘the what’) and pedagogic practice (the ‘how’), are determined not by the Australian Curriculum: English, but a devolving spiral of recontextualisation practices involving the Departments of Education in each state and territory, schooling systems, school-based program teams and individual teachers. The interpretation of the Australian Curriculum: English and the emphasis on cross-curriculum priorities have differed across the jurisdictions. We also acknowledge the rigorous debates about what counts as Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous perspectives or Indigenous studies are still occurring around the world (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011).

Before offering a definitive yes or no answer to the title question, The ‘Indigenous Australian’ theme in the Australian Curriculum: English – Necessary or not?, we want to document one set of sample learning experiences that shows how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures can be embedded into the disciplinary field of English.
The ‘Indigenous Australian’ theme in the Australian Curriculum English: Necessary or not? by Beryl Exley and Lisa Kervin

We refer to the recently published ALEA occasional publication, Playing with Grammar in the Early Years: Learning about language in the Australian Curriculum: English (Exley & Kervin, 2013*).

In the sub-strand ‘Language for interaction’, we focus on the Year 2 content description ‘ACELA1461 - Understanding ‘that language varies when people take on different roles in social and classroom interactions and how the use of key interpersonal language resources varies depending on context’ (ACARA, 2013). The learning experiences are based around Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod’s (1999) children’s picturebook Shake a Leg. Our suggested learning experiences include (i) setting up a yarning circle; (ii) exploring an online copy of an ‘Aboriginal Language Map’; (iii) introducing oneself according to the Uncle Ernie Grant’s (1998) My Land My Tracks framework that connects Land, Language, Culture, Time, Place and Relationships; (iv) sharing and discussing the text Shake a Leg; (v) focusing on the Aboriginal English as well as Italian language used throughout the story; (vi) talking about the different social functions of different language choices; (vii) brainstorming what the children would like to know about other languages; (viii) constructing a data generation tool on Survey Monkey, and; (ix) analysing the respondents’ similar and different experiences of the social uses of language. We remind readers that these are a set of experiences – we do not expect that these would be done in the one sitting, nor would they be the only response offered to this theme in a Year 2 English classroom.

In our sample learning experiences, embedding promotes a form of reconciliation where acknowledgement rather than participation in ‘otherness’ tends to dominate. The outcomes support two of the many goals associated with the reconciliation agenda, that of improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students and educating non-Indigenous students about Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. This latter goal is not to re-make non-Indigenous students as Indigenous, but rather to add to all students’ knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing and thus increasing sensitivity towards issues relevant to reconciliation. In closing, our answer to the closed question posited in the title is a resounding ‘yes’; the ‘Indigenous Australian’ theme in the Australian Curriculum: English is necessary in all classrooms, for all students.

References

*This occasional publication was made available free of charge to all ALEA individual and institutional members over summer 2013/2014. Further copies can be purchased through ALEA by free calling 1800 248 379.
The ‘Indigenous Australian’ theme in the Australian Curriculum English: Necessary or not? by Beryl Exley and Lisa Kervin

Bios

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