

# Truth-telling in the Australian Curriculum

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## Abstract

Unlike Canada and South Africa, Australia has not completed a national Truth-telling of First Nations histories. As a consequence, the curriculum is at risk of excluding Truth-telling, leading to indoctrination of past injustices as part of school learning. Our analysis critically examines the use of Truth-telling language in the Australian Curriculum—Version 9. Eighteen Truth-telling terms were identified from a chapter on Truth-telling in the *2018 Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. Using Bernstein's strong and weak classification, instances of Truth-telling terms were identified in the curriculum. There were three instances of Truth-telling in the mandated Content Descriptors of discipline-based learning areas. Only one of these instances was in the primary years. Across the weak classification where teaching was optional,

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there were 31 instances in the Content Elaborations, one instance in the Cross-Curriculum Priority and no instances in the General Capabilities. And 16 of the 32 instances in the Content Elaborations were in secondary History which not all students study. With only weak classification of Truth-telling, students will continue to be indoctrinated into an unconscious learning of bias and erasure of First Nations histories. One way to limit the settler colonial violence in the Australian Curriculum is to mandate more Truth-telling to overcome what is perpetuating a Great Australian Silence.

#### KEYWORDS

Australian Curriculum, Australian First Nations, Truth-telling

## INTRODUCTION—THE NEED FOR TRUTH-TELLING<sup>1</sup> IN SCHOOLS

Schools have a moral responsibility to communicate the truth to students in the curriculum. When knowledge is mandated by the curriculum, it shapes the identities of citizens and the futures of the nation (Halbert & Salter, 2019). In Australia, the truth about the violent acts of British invasion has left a legacy of colonial violence that permeates institutions across Australia, including schools. Truth-telling in Australia is a crucial step towards making sustained structural and institutional reforms (Maddison et al., 2023). Truth-telling in the curriculum can be part of these sustained and institutional reforms because every child is touched by the content of the curriculum.

The purpose of this research is to critically examine the use of Truth-telling language in the *Australian Curriculum (Version 9) (AC)*. The AC is a three-dimensional structure with (1) eight Discipline-Based Learning Areas (DBLA) in English, Mathematics, Science, Health and Physical Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, The Arts, Technologies and Languages; (2) seven General Capabilities (GC) focusing on skills for work (critical and creative thinking, digital literacy, ethical understanding, intercultural understanding, literacy, numeracy and personal, and social and social capability), and (3) three cross-curriculum priorities (CCP) that provide overarching connections across all disciplines. There is a hierarchy of how learning is valued in the curriculum with DBLA having Content Descriptors that are mandated in teaching and learning while the optional Content Elaborations have links to the GC and CCP. Lowe et al. (2025) contend that DBLA marginalises any teaching of the CCP and limits the capacity for teachers to think outside of the settler colonial discipline structures.

Our paper begins by outlining the need for Truth-telling in the curriculum. We draw on Wolfe's (2006) work on the logic of elimination and the weak and strong classification of the curriculum (Bernstein, 2018) as the theoretical framing for the paper. The methodology gives a background to the generation of Truth-telling terms and the inclusion criteria used in the study. This is followed by an analysis and interpretation of these words and the text around them referring to the curriculum structure and year level. In the discussion, we provide reasons for the limited coverage of Truth-telling in the AC.

## Positionality and terminology

Our positionality is important to outline in this research. We are a group of 30 researchers who are committed to decolonising education in so-called Australia. Five members of our group identify as First Nations<sup>2</sup> and 25 have diverse colonist and migrant heritages. A total of 20 members of the research team are academics who collaborated with 10 members of the research team who were current students in a Masters-level unit where the language of Truth-telling in the curriculum was taught. While the focus of this paper is about Truth-telling, our collaborative approach to this research is outlined in the methodology.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The lying nation

Australia was invaded by the British without a treaty in place with the First Nations peoples. Without a treaty, 'the British messed up the colonisation of Australia' (Reynolds, 2021, p. 7) and consequently lies have been told to erase the unpalatable truths. Morris et al. (2023) argue that 'the British settled with the lie that claimed Australia was acquired through peaceful settlement, whereas Truth-telling shows frontier violence and massacres were used to dominate the Australian Indigenous populations by both policies of extermination and exploitation' (pp. 2–3). Australia remains without an agreed national treaty. Truth-telling, therefore, foregrounds a link between the frontier violence and the limited social, cultural, and economic choices/opportunities First Nations peoples have in Australia.

Prior to invasion, young people had been educated very well for millennia without the kind of curriculum structures that are present in contemporary Australia. Mandated curricula that have been implemented in Australian schools reinscribe colonial practices. The curricula across Australia were shaped as a result of excluding non-European children and knowledges and making stark distinctions between the children of convicts and the children of 'Free Settlers' initially, and were further shaped through tensions between the Church and the State for the establishment of religious, secular, and free education across the colonies (Barcan, 1980). Despite these tensions and at the heart of all the curriculum development and reform was a colonial, and after Federation, a neo-colonial agenda of prioritising Anglo-Australian content at the expense of First Nations contexts (Hughes & Fricker 2024; Stanner, 1968).

### The role of Truth-telling in education

Education plays an important role in Truth-telling where teachers can unravel true Histories. Truth-telling in education can include the violence towards Indigenous peoples (Tupper & Mitchell, 2022), confronting the implications of historical injustices (Vines, 2022) and opportunities to promote a reconciled national identity (Gainsford, 2018). Approaches to Truth-telling dictate the kind of outcomes achieved. Maddison et al. (2023) suggest there are two views of Truth-telling; a 'normative view that foregrounds the promise of truth and a critical view that suggests Truth-telling might contribute to sustaining settler colonialism' (p. 213). Truth-telling in education might also offend. In the three-part documentary on the Australian Wars produced by Rachel Perkins, Denise Lovett-Murray (Gunditjmara) states: 'The truth needs to be told regardless of who we offend. Because you know what? We were more than offended' (Perkins et al., 2022, 10:35). Truth-telling is a political project that can include diverse learning across an increasing number of high-quality multimodal resources.

## Indigenous erasure in the curriculum

In an analysis of the acts of domination that characterised invasion and erasure, Wolfe (2006) proposes the settler colonial state is engaged in a logic of elimination to normalise narratives and structures of land ownership by the invaders. This logic leads to the erasure of the rich cultural and educational practices that were practiced on the lands before they were invaded (Rudolph & Hogarth, 2020). The AC is entangled in this settler colonial project of Indigenous erasure. Curriculum content is naturally aligned to settler colonial constructions of history that act as a controlling discourse of replacing Indigenous versions of history (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Tupper and Mitchell (2022) suggest that Truth-telling and reconciliation cannot occur when ‘formal education and curricula ... render invisible, marginal and inferior, Indigenous histories, experiences, epistemologies, and ontologies’ (p. 351). The use of specific Truth-telling terms in the AC could validate student learning about the True Histories of Australia. Without this mandated content, the Eurocentric thinking in learning and teaching in the curriculum is reinforced (Gabi et al., 2023) which is contrary to the AC that aspires to ‘allow all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures’ (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024a, September 10, p. 1). As outlined below, this aspiration is not achieved partly because of the hierarchical nature of the AC.

## Classification the curriculum content

Bernstein argues knowledge in the curriculum is hierarchical based on how it is framed and classified. Where there is strong classification in the curriculum, there are clear boundaries between knowledge that signifies the nature of the differences between the discipline content (Bernstein, 2018). Bernstein (1999) also argues that strongly classified fields of knowledge are arranged as vertical discourses that contain specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge, prioritised by the institution, individually assessed and that are taught as an ongoing process. For the purposes of this study, the Content Descriptors of the DBLA areas have a strong classification. In their critique of the AC, Lowe et al. (2024) claim that Whiteness underwrites the deficit approaches to Indigenous culture and knowledge in the AC. Lowe et al. (2025) also argue the weak classification of the CCP underpins a persistence of deficit approaches to Indigenous culture and knowledge in the AC. According to Bernstein (2018), the weak classification is also evidence of how the content is locally organised and communally learned and limited rigorous assessment. The Content Elaborations, GC, and CCP all have weak classification in this study following this logic.

While Bernstein’s classification and framing could be viewed as binary in terms of how the curriculum is enacted, the terminology of strong and weak classification offers solid grounding in the language used in the AC. This statement is made about the Content Elaborations; ‘They are optional material only; they are not a set of complete or comprehensive content points that all students need to be taught’ (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024a, September 10, para 4). While the CCP are tethered to the elaborations, the CCP content is also optional in teaching. If Truth-telling is important in Australia, then Truth-telling terminology needs to be in the strongly classified Content Descriptors, so all students are exposed to this learning.

## METHODOLOGY

At the onset of this research, we came together online to understand how Truth-telling language plays an important role in validating what we teach. We realised the opportunity

for this research as a decolonising project, following research by Hughes & Fricker (2024) which identified that decolonising the curriculum can be owned and operationalised by the non-Indigenous stakeholders. As the majority of us identify with non-Indigenous heritage, we came together on this Truth-telling project with a clear sense of purpose to analyse the curriculum for Truth-telling across the strong and weak classifications of the curriculum. Our work on this project was interrupted by the symbolic and racist violence leading up to the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum and our dismay around the consequent failure of the referendum to pass. We started this work in 2023 and made some slight revisions to the article after the AC Version 9 data were downloaded on 16 June 2024.

As outlined in the introduction, the 18 Truth-telling terms were generated from a chapter on Truth-telling from the Gainsford (2018) report. This report was generated from a Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to First Nations peoples. It covered matters relating to constitutional change that might have been necessary had the Australian people passed the yes vote in the referendum in 2023.<sup>3</sup>

The Joint Select Committee analysed submissions from key stakeholders, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations. Truth-telling emerged as important in the process of healing and reconciliation during the development of the Uluru Statement of the Heart. The stakeholders identified the link between the need for Truth-telling in the ongoing legacies of colonisation. The Truth-telling terms selected from this chapter provided a specific language that the authors knew was also used by researchers in the field of decolonial education in Australia. This process generated 18 Truth-telling terms: *atrocities, discrimination, dispossession, frontier, genocide, hunted, incarcerated, injustices, invasion, loss, malnutrition, massacres, murder, poverty, stolen generations, trauma, truth, war/s*. One of the limitations of this study is that synonyms and alternative language for each term were not searched. While the results might be different had synonyms and alternative language been included, we feel the 18 Truth-telling terms form a solid commonly shared vocabulary used to articulate Truth-telling in Australia.

In this study, we did not search the entire AC for these terms. Glossaries, information about the discipline learning and comparative information with previous versions of the curriculum were not searched as these were not a central feature of the curriculum learning. We used the selective download function of the AC to download all the DBLA Content Descriptors, Content Elaborations, the GC, and CCP. While these documents were searched for instances of Truth-telling, some uses of the terms were not relevant to the study. For example, when 'invasion' is used in science in respect to invasive species.

The authors worked in teams of two or three with at least one academic in each team. After orientation and strategy meetings, each team analysed one of the 18 terms, describing the discipline and year level in the AC associated with the term. Each team provided a robust justification for the inclusion of their term in the curriculum using evidence from published literature. Substantial sections of the literature review, discussion, and conclusion were generated from editing these analyses.

## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Truth-telling terms were categorised by the dimensions of the AC and also the year levels. Table 1 provides evidence of the instances of each term across the strong and weak classification in the curriculum. While there are three dimensions to the Australian Curriculum (Discipline-Based Learning Areas, CCP, and GC), the four categories of curriculum learning in Table 1 are the result of splitting the DBLA into the strongly classified Content Descriptors and weakly classified Content Elaborations. The column on the right indicates the year levels where the terms were found.

TABLE 1 Instances of Truth-telling terminology in the Australian Curriculum.

Truth-telling terminology	Content descriptors (strong)	Cross-curriculum priority (weak)	General capabilities (weak)	Content elaboration (weak)	Year levels in content elaboration
Atrocities	0	0	0	0	
Discrimination	0	0	0	3	8,10,9
Dispossession	0	0	0	2	7,4
Frontier	0	0	0	5	4,5,9,9,9
Genocide	0	0	0	0	
Hunted	0	0	0	0	
Incarcerated	0	0	0	0	
Injustices	0	0	0	0	
Invasion	1	1	0	2	3,9
Loss	0	0	0	2	4,4
Malnutrition	0	0	0	0	
Massacres	0	0	0	2	9,9
Murder	0	0	0	0	
Poverty	0	0	0	0	
Stolen Generations	1	0	0	9	6,10,10,10,10,10,10,10
Trauma	0	0	0	0	
Truth	0	0	0	4	10,10,10,10
War/s	1	0	0	2	9,10
Total	3	1	0	31	

## Truth-telling in the content descriptors

One of the three instances of Truth-telling in the Content Descriptors were in the primary years. In Year 4, AC9HS4K04<sup>4</sup> identifies how the arrival of First Fleet ‘was viewed by First Nations Australians as an invasion’. This sets up a binary framing of identity politics implying that only First Nations Australians consider Australia was invaded. The two secondary instances were found in the History Content Descriptors. The term ‘Stolen Generations’ was used in passing as a cause of First Nations campaigns for rights and freedoms before 1965 (AC9HH10K09). The changing role of First Nations Australians in the Second World War was mentioned in AC9HH10K04 referring to the term War. This demonstrates a shift in attitudes as the contributions of First Nations peoples during wartime both in Australia and overseas have been ignored in the past (Appleby & Davis, 2018). However, there is a marked silence on the violence of colonialism and the trauma of the Frontier Wars in the Humanities and Social Sciences Curriculum. Both instances of Truth-telling, referred to the First Nations perspectives after the qualifying phrase ‘such as’ in the Content Descriptors.

## Truth-telling terms in the cross-curriculum priorities

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures CCP area has three interconnected aspects of Country/Place, Culture, and People. Each of these three aspects has three organising ideas. When the terms from the report were searched, only one instance appeared under the concept of Country/place; invasion. The organising idea states: ‘The occupation and colonisation of Australia by the British, under the now overturned doctrine of terra nullius, were experienced by First Nations Australians as an *invasion* that denied their occupation of, and connection to, Country/Place’ (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024a, September 10, p. 3). There is no reference to the contested nature of this claim of invasion in the organising ideas.

The limited use of Truth-telling terminology in this CCP that has a focus on Histories of First Nations Australians is perplexing but also understandable when the context of teaching Truth-telling has only just begun. By not focusing *on* Truth-telling in this CCP, there is a stronger theme of resilience and continuity in the curriculum that positions First Nations Australians with strength, knowledge and sovereignty.

## Truth-telling terms in the general capabilities

A notable absence of Truth-telling in the GC is symbolic of the limited scope for teaching Truth-telling outside of the disciplines. While the GC has a weak classification, the opportunity to teach Truth-telling when learning about ethics, intercultural understanding, creative and critical thinking, and personal and social capabilities is not supported.

## Truth-telling terms in the content elaborations

In the primary school curriculum, there were 10 instances of Truth-telling covering six terms. While this seems like a sound coverage of Truth-telling, five of these instances were included in one Content Elaboration in the Year 4 Humanities and Social Sciences (AC9HS4K04) where the students learn about the effects of contact and how this was viewed by First Nations Australians as invasion. One of the Content Elaborations from

AC9HS4K04 states 'examining paintings and accounts by individuals involved in exploration and colonisation to explore the impact that British colonisation had on the lives of First Nations Australians; for example, dispossession, dislocation and the loss of lives through frontier conflict, disease, and loss of food sources and medicines, the embrace of some colonial technologies, the practice of colonial religion, and intermarriage between colonists and Australian First Nations Peoples' (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024b, September 10, para 4). The use of three Truth-telling terms (dispossession, frontier conflict and loss) as examples in one elaboration means that primary teachers might hesitate to fully engage with all of this content with students. The profound losses resulting from colonialism are among the forms of 'difficult knowledge' in the so-called 'post-truth' context that Dadvand et al. (2022, p. 286) emphasise as necessary in comprehending intricate narratives of experience. They highlight the significance of tactfully dealing with these sensitive issues through pedagogically considerate and ethical approaches in education, and interdisciplinary dialogues. It is notable that in the sole curriculum elaboration explicitly linking Indigenous loss to colonialism uses the past tense, not acknowledging that these losses are ongoing.

Sparse instances of Truth-telling in primary school are found across the year levels. In Year 3 in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the term frontier was also used in an elaboration as one of six examples of an investigation of an event or development and explaining its impact (AC9HS5K03) 'the impact of the exploration of the interior by figures such as Mitchell, Oxley and Sturt on frontier conflict'. There is a one in six chance teachers will engage in this elaboration with five other possible examples.

There is one inclusion of learning about Stolen Generations in Year 6 Humanities and Social Sciences. In this instance, the term was only used as an example from three ideas to show how to use flowcharts to show steps in a sequence.

## **Terms used only in the secondary school curriculum**

The terms war/s, discrimination, Truth-telling and massacres appeared only in the secondary curriculum learning areas in Truth-telling contexts. An analysis of the curriculum showed that First Nations people are mentioned twice where the term war is used. However, this inclusion is based around what Rigney and Kelly (2021, p. 149) refer to as 'normative anglocentric... practices' with a focus on European warfare, particularly in reference to World War I. Indigenous perspectives have been included in AC9HH9K08 and AC9HH10K04 regarding the experiences of Indigenous servicemen and the roles of First Nations Australians on the home front. The violence of war and impacts of colonialism continue to this day. But without mention of wars and violence of colonisation, students are not able to critically comprehend and engage in Truth-telling both in primary, and later when it is introduced in secondary history classes (Bedford & Wall, 2020). There is a need to include this learning about the Frontier Wars in the primary curriculum.

There are a mere three instances of the term discrimination in direct relation to First Nations peoples in the Curriculum. Two appear for secondary Health and Physical Education in the context of addressing bias in sports settings. In Year 8 AC9HP8P04 proposes strategies for addressing racism towards First Nations peoples including discrimination, while in Year 10 students identify 'the ways in which historical patterns of inequity, violence and discrimination can have lasting intergenerational effects on wellbeing, and considering strategies to build the cultural awareness, empathy, compassion and respect that contribute to reconciliation' (AC9HP10P04). The third instance of the term is found in Year 9 History explaining the effects of war on returned soldiers including First Nations soldiers, which Toore (2023) identified included discrimination.

Truth-telling appeared four times in Year 10 discipline learning areas. In Year 9 and 10's Health and Physical Education, students learn how to interact with others for personal, social and community health. They can investigate how the efforts promoting Truth-telling can build cultural awareness and empathy in establishing and maintaining respectful relationships (AC9HP10P04), a theme that runs through the curriculum.

In the Year 7–10 History curriculum, students learn about the significant events and methods in the movement for the civil rights of First Nations Australians in understanding the history of building modern Australia (AC9HH10K11). The elaboration example confirms that Reconciliation is not a single event but an ongoing process of Truth-telling and healing.

In the Year 7–10 Civics and Citizenship curriculum, two instances of Truth-telling include: learning about government and democracy where students gain the knowledge about the Australian Government's role and responsibilities at a regional and global level (AC9HC10K02). While understanding Australia's responsibilities and participation as a member of the global community, students also learn to evaluate the impacts of global issues on Australia's identity including First Nations Australians' reconciliation, Truth-telling and sovereignty.

In citizenship, diversity and identity, students learn about the challenges to and ways of sustaining a resilient democracy and a cohesive society in Australia and/or in our region or globally (AC9HC10K05). In the process, students can identify possible threats to democratic societies and examine the Western democratic heritage and values in supporting participation in public debate about controversial issues. Truth-telling and other First Nations-related issues are framed as examples of controversial issues in the elaboration. These four examples show a limited amount of Truth-telling and detailed history for students' understanding.

The two instances where the term massacres of First Nations people are acknowledged are both in the Content Elaborations for the same Content Descriptor in Year 9 History (AC9HH9K03). The terms are used as an example of the effects of colonisation and the analysis of the impact of colonisation. These two Content Elaborations build knowledge and understanding about the 'causes and effects of European contact and extension of settlement, including their impact on First Nations Peoples of Australia' (AC9HH9K03). According to the Gainsford (2018) report, the massacres of First Nations Australians need to be acknowledged to fully understand the ongoing, damaging impact of this 'strategy' of colonisation. Massacres have 'likely been proximate to many of the reprehensible events now subject to Truth-telling today' (Sutton, 2023, p. 729) as evidenced by the extensive work of mapping massacres in Australia (Ryan, 2023). Acknowledgement of the massacres which occurred is particularly important due to a long history of erasure of these massacres (Povey et al., 2023) and denials of intent which followed throughout the history wars of the 1990s (Barolsky, 2023). Clearly, this needs to be framed outside the simplistic 'massacre narratives' which 'incorrectly ascribes to our First Nations peoples a lack of agency and a passivity' (Bedford & Wall, 2020, p. 53); the nuances and complexities of these massacres which also saw the resistance, and survival, of First Nations people's needs to be embedded in any curriculum.

## Terms used in both primary and secondary contexts

Several terms were included in Truth-telling contexts in the primary and secondary learning areas in the curriculum: dispossession, frontier, invasion, and Stolen Generations.

The terms dispossession and invasion were used once more in secondary context after it was introduced once in primary school. Dispossession was used in Year 7 AC9HG7K07

to describe the 'cultural connectedness and belonging that First Nations Australians have to places through family, Country/Place, dispossession, relocation and employment'. The term is also used in Year 9 History (AC9HH9K01) as an example of 'identifying and describing the effects of the movements of peoples on colonised peoples' (although not specifically Australian First Nations peoples); in Year 9–10 Media (AC9AMA10E02) when 'exploring the ways First Nations Australian media artists and producers use their practice to communicate ideas, messages and lived experiences to the broader community'. Such learning opens up opportunities for the complex arrangements that make connections to place difficult to sustain in the settler colonial state. Barolsky (2023) laments the lack of acknowledgement that the country's prosperity is founded on this violent dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and dispossession was and continues to be facilitated by law. The absence of this term continues Australia's 'twin genealogies of dispossession and forgetfulness' (Birch, 2002, p. 45).

The term invasion was used in the Year 9 secondary History context to explain why terms like invasion, colonisation, and settlement continue to be contested in Australia. This elaboration clearly shows how Truth-telling in Australia is still contested and negotiated. Missing from the elaboration is the way 'settler ideologies are enacted to undermine, marginalise, and/or silence Indigenous peoples' (Weuffen et al., 2023, p. 135) by contesting the truth. The third instance of the invasion in AC9HH9S07 identifies how Historians change interpretations of events over time, but this does not connect the use of the term to the political agenda of maintaining dominance of settler colonialism in Australia.

Also featured in the History curriculum were terms frontier and stolen. The frontier conflict appears again as an example of the impacts and effects of colonisation in an elaboration in Year 9. Where the Curriculum deals with Frontier Wars there is little guidance on how this must be taught. For example, AC9HS4K04 provides an explanation of the use of paintings and other accounts of colonisation and its impact on the loss of lives during frontier wars. AC9HH9S07 and AC9HS5K03 also expect students to analyse 'how historians have changed the way they interpret events', such as frontier conflicts, and investigate the 'economic, social or political impact on a colony'. AC9HH9K03 discusses the spread of disease and cultural destruction due to colonisation. Therefore, teaching the history of Frontier Wars in schools calls for a demythologising pedagogy (Bedford & Wall, 2020). Terms such as frontier: conflict, warfare, violence, colonial frontier, or Frontier Wars are commonly used to describe the atrocities experienced by pre-contact First Nations communities (Appleby & Davis, 2018; Bedford & Wall, 2020). While this historically disputed 'truth' on the frontier and the gradual shift in society towards Truth-telling is happening, the weakly classified learning indicates that the AC is lagging behind with these changes.

The term Stolen was referenced in the Year 9 and Year 10 History learning a total of nine times. Although the *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* report was completed in 1997, it was not until 2008 that the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised for the forced removal of First Nations children from their families over generations. However, First Nations children are still being taken from families under various pretexts (Gainsford, 2018) which questions learning about stolen children as distant History.

Appleby and Davis (2018) identify the 'failure of the Australian educational curriculum to comprehensively teach this history' (p. 502). This failure is demonstrated through the very limited inclusion of the Stolen Generations in the AC. The Year 9 History, Year 10 History and Year 10 Civics and Citizenship curricula mention teaching Stolen Generations as examples of learning. As History is most often offered as an elective at Year 10, many students will not be exposed to the Stolen Generations, and most will not explore the issue in any depth. There is no guarantee that the topic will not be handled from a colonialist perspective

below Year 10. There were no instances of the term 'stolen' used in reference to the unresolved issue of compensation for stolen wages.

## Terms used in curriculum but not in Truth-telling contexts

There are five terms identified in the Gainsford (2018) report that are used in the curriculum but not in Truth-telling contexts: malnutrition, atrocity, poverty, trauma, and murder.

The term malnutrition appears just once in the AC in the context of global issues and challenges around hunger, with no reference to the First Nations context in Australia. The Gainsford (2018) report also mentions this term once, in connection to the detrimental impacts of Australia's settlement on the Indigenous people, and the deaths caused due to diseases and malnutrition. Adams et al. (2018) analysis of bioarchaeological evidence supports the presence of dental hypoplasia in Traditional Owners, indicating early chronic nutritional stress, likely influenced by infectious diseases and limited availability of native foods.

What is most immediately telling, is the absence of the term atrocity to describe or report the massacres, poisonings, forced removals and other forms of institutionalised violence enacted as and through colonisation. This is despite commitments, like Bedford and Wall (2020) 'to ensure that our students leave our classrooms with a truthful account of our nation's past and a feeling of safety and respect, regardless of their background' (p. 47). By not including terms like atrocities in the curriculum discipline learning content, educators are not critically examining the True Histories of Australia.

Gainsford (2018) acknowledges that the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include poverty. However, the F-10 curriculum does not mention poverty in a Truth-telling capacity. Rather, it acknowledges poverty from a conceptual or broad global/societal perspective only once, recognising poverty within Australia's colonial history to address the economic state of British colonies at the time. This focus suggests an ongoing prioritisation of settler colonial histories over the True Histories of Australia, restricting the potential for F-10 learners to gain a comprehensive understanding. While the Year 9 Health and Physical Education learning area (AC9HP10P04) addresses historical patterns of inequity, there is no specific reference to First Nations peoples being historically impacted by patterns of inequality that lead to poverty. Wedesweiler (2020) notes that crimes against Indigenous people have caused pervasive, intergenerational poverty. Without an understanding of structures that lead to poverty, students will struggle to see the need for treaty and Truth-telling.

## Terms not found in the curriculum

Four terms were not found in any discipline learning area in or out of a Truth-telling context: genocide, hunted, incarcerated, and injustice. These terms are used extensively to describe post-invasion Australian History and contemporary contexts. There are compelling arguments that consider the colonisation of Australia as having a genocidal impact on First Nations people and much of what the colonists did to First Nations people as being inherently unjust.

The discipline learning content knowledge and elaborations do not include the term hunted in relation to Truth-telling. Too often, First Nations people were hunted by 'expeditions' of fully equipped forces of colonist police forces who saw First Nations peoples as 'inferior, lacking and uneducable' (Hogarth, 2022, p. 2). This history of disruption to life of First Nations people and the manner of hegemony of colonists as they hunted Indigenous families must be open to discussion. There are truth and justice commissions currently underway in Australia.

The omission of the term genocide in the AC is a failure to acknowledge a core truth about how land ownership came about in Australia and the continuing implications of land ownership in the settler colonial state. Genocide is entangled in the policies of elimination of First Nations Australians that have morphed into settler colonial structures that seek to erase Indigenous peoples from positions of power and control (Wolfe, 2006).

The term incarcerated was missing in the curriculum. The failure of national and state jurisdictions to provide culturally responsive pedagogy for First Nations students in Australia goes a long way to explain the high levels of incarceration of First Nations peoples (Morgan, 2019). As a Truth-telling exercise, there is an opportunity to include learning in the curriculum about the systemic injustices of the settler colonial arrangements that lead to the over-representation of incarcerated First Nations Australians. Such learning could include the history of policies of exclusion of First Nations peoples from schooling for many years (Moodie & Fricker, 2023) which is still ongoing today.

The omission of learning about the History of systemic injustices in the curriculum contrasts with many reports of education, health, and housing and the media reports about injustices faced by First Nations peoples.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings highlight the limited inclusion of Truth-telling terminology in the DBLA and CCP. Most of the terminology was found in secondary Humanities units, with the majority in the Year 10 History curriculum area. Banking most of Truth-telling learning in Year 10 History is problematic because History is only offered as an elective at Year 10 across Australia.

Many of the instances of Truth-telling were not strongly connected to concepts that critiqued the tenets of settler colonialism. Without these strong connections back to the events, practices, and structures that established and maintained settler colonial ownership of land, the teaching of Truth-telling is tied to deficit constructions of Indigeneity.

Our discussion provides four reasons for the limited coverage of Truth-telling in the Australian Curriculum.

### **The history of silence in Australia**

The absence of the above terms in various Australian curricula is not so much a factor of having been written out of history, but more of never having been written into it in the first place. It is arguable that this stems from what Stanner (1968) described as the Great Australian Silence, wherein, to perpetuate, among other things, the legal fiction of Terra Nullius, First Nations persons, groups, and whole societies were largely excluded from both written and pictorial records. Leaving aside the aspect of unintentional ignorance of facts and persons, it is further arguable that there might well be an element of purposefulness in these omissions.

### **The problem of teaching difficult content**

Huckin (2002) describes five forms of textual elision or 'silence': speech-act silences, presuppositional silences, discreet silences, genre-based silences, and manipulative silences. It is genre-based silences and manipulative silences which are relevant to this study here. A genre-based silence or omission at its most basic could be likened to the omission of facts not relevant to a particular genre. In this case, the most apt genre is

history teaching. Given the wide range of school years that the history curriculum covers, it is not unreasonable to deem many of the atrocities associated with early (and, to an extent, later) colonisation to be too difficult for young children to be exposed to. We believe that this is not a valid position, as there are myriad ways that this content can be presented to students that are both sensitive and age appropriate. This is even more clear in the later years of secondary education. Bedford and Wall (2020) refer to the privileging of 'a massacre narrative' (p. 53) in curriculum packages and other resources designed to teach about the Frontier Wars. Canadian scholars Fast and Drouin-Gagné (2019) argue that Truth-telling is vital to interrupting the ongoing institutionalised trauma experienced by First Nations peoples by 'exposing the full extent of [colonial] violence' (p. 98).

## Truth-telling needs political endorsement

To have Truth-telling included, it needs to be approved through a process that drove a wedge into public thought during the recent referendum in Australia. Omitting facts simply because they do not fit the political stance of those formulating the curricula in the first place is neither accurate nor honest. As such, it is incumbent on those framing the curricula to place accuracy and honesty above political considerations, and include harder topics, at least in the later years. Yet, as Woodroffe (2022) observes: 'school students need to be given a balanced and truthful education about Australia's history... Without cultural competency through education, we can be left with ignorance and racism' (para 15). As First Nations peoples in the Adelaide Dialogue emphasised: 'Healing can only begin when this true history is taught' (Bedford & Wall, 2020, p. 48).

## Catching up with responsibility

Morgan (2019) argues that while the living generation of non-Indigenous Australians are not responsible for past actions of their ancestors, they still benefit from past events, so they have a moral responsibility to remedy the impact of colonisation in Australia. Truth-telling in the curriculum is moving towards acknowledging a future where sovereign and political rights of First Nations peoples are upheld and unsettling those who privilege from settler colonial imaginaries in Australia (Strakosch, 2016). Truth-telling is a lightning rod for disruption of power in so-called Australia because 'representing indigeneity as anything other than damaged is an existential threat to the state' (Moodie & Fricker, 2023).

The limited coverage of Truth-telling in the weakly classified CCP appears to be a conscious strategy of avoiding deficit constructions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representations in the curriculum. Research by First Nations education scholars identifies the prolific unwarranted claims of non-Indigenous deficit representations of First Nations students and communities (Thomson, 2024). On the other hand, in an analysis of education policy, Hogarth (2017) has developed a research framework that rejects deficit constructions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and 'contests the power of the coloniser over the Indigenous populations' (p. 25). Using Hogarth's ideas, instances of Truth-telling in the DBLA could be linked to content that educates students about the injustices of settler colonial structures in Australia. While teachers are mandated by The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders to embed Indigenous content in the curriculum, the absence of this material in the mandated Content Descriptors renders the possibilities as potentially incomprehensible or tokenistic for many.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have provided an analysis and justification for more Truth-telling in the strongly classified discipline learning areas in the AC. Currently, there are only three occurrences of Truth-telling terms in the mandated curriculum across F-10. Therefore, in Australia, many students are at risk of being indoctrinated into a version of history in the curriculum where Truth-telling is optional. Taylor (2017) defines indoctrination as 'a complex system of teaching in which actors with authority contribute to the production or reinforcement of closed-mindedness' (p. 40). The AC serves to indoctrinate students into erasing the violence of colonisation without consciously knowing who they are becoming. Truth-telling, as part of the strong classification of learning in the curriculum, serves to disrupt the indoctrination of settler histories. As Mi'kmaq Nation scholar Battiste (2013) reminds us, every educator has 'a commitment to both unlearn and learn—to unlearn racism and superiority in all its manifestations, while examining our own social constructions in our judgements and learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners' (p. 166). We consider Truth-telling to be essential in the mandatory Content Descriptors of the AC to realise the moral and political purposes of education. Truth-telling in the mandated curriculum not only reverses the erasure of First Nations histories, it questions the settler imaginaries that underwrite the arrangements of land ownership in Australia.

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The data for this project came from two sources. The 18 Truth-telling terms used in this research were generated from a chapter on Truth-telling in the Gainsford (2018) report, a freely available source. The instances of these Truth-telling terms in the [Australian Curriculum \(V9\)](#), available online, were generated following the methodology outlined in the paper.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

None.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Truth-telling is capitalised throughout to denote the importance of the practice.
- <sup>2</sup> We use the term First Nations to refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These terms are used in the Cross-Curriculum Priorities in the Australian Curriculum; First Nations communities of Australia, First Nations Australians and First Peoples of Australia. We acknowledge that there is no one term which is accepted across the First Nations communities and we use these interchangeably and with respect.
- <sup>3</sup> Information about the referendum can be found here: <https://theconversation.com/the-voice-to-parliament-explained-212100>.
- <sup>4</sup> Content descriptions each have a unique identifying number that indicate their location in the curriculum (e.g., AC9HS4K04).

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