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Proppa way: Literature as truth-telling and Indigenous futurity in subject English

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In light of the results of the 2023 referendum, truth-telling should inform how educators embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum. It is imperative that students' experiences of Indigenous content are understood, as this will inform the legitimisation of Indigenous futurity in classrooms and how teachers engage in truth-telling "proppa way" (a colloquial expression Indigenous Australians use to refer to doing something in a way which is culturally informed and appropriate).

Teachers of subject English must understand how their views and approaches to Indigenous literature impact students. Texts present students with First Nations and colonialist histories, the intersections of these histories and the long-lasting legacy of both. How students comprehend and engage with these representations in their classrooms should be prioritised. This paper presents the preliminary findings of my PhD research informed by my positioning as a Mandandanji woman, educator and researcher. This collective case-study research shares data collected from focus groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alongside their English teachers and leaders in private schools across South East Queensland. The data presented privileges the students' voices regarding their experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. This paper presents collaborative visions for the future of English teaching. The role of truth-telling is centred within these artefacts, as we look to disrupt the dominance of colonialism and prioritise Indigenous futurity in Australian English classrooms.

Keywords: subject English, Indigenous content, English teachers, truth-telling

Introduction

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have a shared history that is often presented separately as "black history" or "white history", depending on how the collective "Australian" story is told (Phillips, 2012). The ramifications of the invasion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land on Indigenous peoples' experiences, cultures and histories were largely omitted in early historical records (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012; Stanner, 1969). The doctrine "terra nullius", meaning "land belonging to no-one" in Latin, was declared to colonise Australia (Reynolds, 1987). This initiated a turbulent relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous people, as it was established on a claim that denied the knowledges, languages, cultures and values of Indigenous peoples (Matthews, 2019). This has had immeasurable impacts on the Australian education system as terra nullius was widely accepted and indoctrinated to reinforce dominant social agendas, expectations and norms; the colonial project rendered Indigenous peoples as sub-human, and these racialised discourses continue to permeate schools (Shay, 2016, p. 281).

Specifically, in subject English, Australia's colonial history impacts the stories we are told and the literature that is included in our curriculum. Australian writing, particularly Australian Indigenous writing, has had to fight for a place in the curriculum (McLean Davies et al., 2017). Curriculum stakeholders and teachers are beginning to realise, though, that including a wider range of diverse texts in the English Curriculum could facilitate more discussions about cultural differences in society (Jogie, 2015). Such discussions could interrogate normative Western notions of authentic or legitimate knowledge (Hart et al., 2012). This would prevent the current Eurocentric practices, beliefs and values of Australian school culture reproducing hegemony while effectively creating "otherness" within non-European cultures (Hart et al., 2012). This disruption would encourage teachers to self-reflexively address their own views about Indigenous content and engage in the truth-telling that has been called for consistently over hundreds of years, but very prominently and publicly since 2017 in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017).

When referring to truth-telling, I utilise the definition of "truth" encompassed within the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*; this definition is grounded in the hope that all Australians will reach a shared understanding of our country's colonial history and its contemporary impacts as a result of a comprehensive process that reveals the atrocities and injustices faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

If educators do not actively seek to engage in truth-telling, education can reinforce existing disadvantage, as institutions can reproduce and reaffirm inequity (Kelly, 2000, p. 83). Therefore, to achieve a "reconciled Australia", educators must empower and prioritise young Indigenous peoples (Fredericks et al., 2020). This is essential, as Indigenous young peoples' strength, adaptability and desire for change make them an invaluable transformative tool in solutions-oriented approaches to imagining alternative futures for Indigenous peoples (Fredericks et al., 2020). Only then can Indigenous futurity be guaranteed.

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of my PhD collective case-study research, which seeks to understand Indigenous and non-Indigenous young peoples' experiences of the embedding of Indigenous perspectives in subject English. The broader PhD project asks the central question, "How can the principles of self-determination and codesign influence subject English teachers in private schools in their embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and perspectives?" Private schools were chosen for the study due to the agency they have around embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in light of recent curriculum revisions and requirements. Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum seeks to deepen all students' understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, the impact of British arrival, Indigenous perspectives and the ongoing contributions of Indigenous peoples within modern Australia (Australian Curriculum, 2024). This paper specifically draws on data from focus groups with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, together with their English teachers. Within these focus groups, students and teachers conceptualised and co-created visions of the future for subject English regarding how Indigenous perspectives are embedded. The voices of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants are featured in this paper through these shared designs, but student voices (particularly Indigenous student voices) were prioritised wherever possible. A dominant emerging theme is that Indigenous literature should be engaged with for the purposes of truth-telling, but this needs to be done "proppa way", meaning culturally informed and appropriate. I argue that truth-telling through Indigenous literature is an effective way to establish the place of Indigenous futurity in education systems.

Positionality

I am a proud Aboriginal woman with maternal and cultural connections to Mandandanji Country (Roma in south-west Queensland). My communal responsibilities are to my immediate Aboriginal family, who predominantly now live in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast, as well as to Mandandanji Country where my family lived prior to colonisation, post-colonisation and to date. I was born and raised in Brisbane, and now live here with my own young family. This means I am accountable to the community in which I live and am accepted. I am also accountable to the private schools across South East Queensland that have generously shared their time and experiences in this research. I, too, attended private school in South East Queensland and taught in private schools in Western Sydney. My experiences as an Indigenous student and teacher inform my positioning in this research, as I was always seeking educational experiences that reflected the complexity of Indigenous knowledge and Indigeneity in both learning and teaching (Thomson, 2024).

It is these communal responsibilities and experiences that drive me to disrupt the rhetoric of assimilation and whiteness that lingers in the construction of subject English. I hope that my research can serve as a form of resistance and a way of advocating for the privileging of Indigenous voices. My worldview, shaped by my upbringing, is that the benefit of the collective supersedes the pursuits of individuals (Graham, 1999). This ideal has not only shaped my social activism, but my desire to disrupt the logic of coloniality. My research will always be informed by my desire to liberate students from colonial dominance in English classrooms. My lived experience—of being an Indigenous student and teacher in English classrooms that were dominated by prevailing narratives of literary merit and culture presumed to be attached to whiteness—informs this. The richness and diversity that emerges from drawing on ontologies that privilege Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing allow for social justice rhetoric to shift and for pervasive issues to be focused on, while new knowledge is developed (Shay et al., 2022).

Through engaging in this research, I can also be part of the scholarship that emphasises the political integrity and importance of Indigenous peoples as sovereign First Nations Australians, which aligns with the perpetuation and legitimisation of Indigenous futurity. Privileging the voices and stories of myself and other Indigenous peoples is a way of understanding past and ongoing experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in education systems; deconstructing these colonial spaces in this way is a way of reimagining the future for the benefit of Indigenous students and securing Indigenous futurity within Australian classrooms (Shay & Wickes, 2017).

Advocating for Indigenous futurity – understanding settler futurity and how this can be disrupted within education systems

"Futurity" is not the same as the term "future"; notions of futurity are primarily concerned with the way groups produce knowledge about and envision futures (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2018, p. 86). This necessitates critical thinking and deeply provocative work regarding how aspirational futures could be assisted, actualised and legitimised by our current logics, practices and actions (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2018; Kulago, 2019). For educators and educational researchers, the business of futurity motivates our process, as we are deeply invested in the production of knowledge that supports how we envision our futures (Kulago, 2019, p. 243). With this in mind, it is important to understand that settler futurity continues to dominate how Indigenous futurity and Indigenous sovereignties are conceived.

Settler-colonialism was built upon the "logic of elimination" that aimed to eradicate Indigenous existence and presence to assert settler futurity as dominant (Brousseau, 2021). These practices are said to be ongoing when non-Indigenous people attempt to establish and enshrine notions of settler sovereignty (Brousseau, 2021, p. 112). To secure settler futurity, the ongoing legacy of colonisation must be maintained so that it can perpetuate the methods of replacement that are needed to legitimise the occupation of land (Brousseau, 2021; Wolfe, 2006). Therefore, the operationalisation of elimination has become an organising principle and part of the structure of settler-colonial society (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). These structures of replacement that attempt to over-ride or replace Indigenous sovereignty have become normalised (Brousseau, 2021, p. 112). In colonial education systems, the white subject's "manifest destiny" is to be privileged in curricula and "to take the place of the savage" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 77). As this rhetoric is damaging, let alone assimilative and actively colonising, many education scholars are working to disrupt notions of settler futurity by advocating for Indigenous futurity (Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Kulago, 2019; Shirley, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Indigenous futurity is resistance and activism that seeks to reveal the ways settler futurity has continually attempted to erase and replace Indigenous groups (Eglash et al., 2020; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Indigenous futurity instead prioritises and amplifies the ongoing presence and persistence of Indigenous peoples (Eglash et al., 2020, p. 86). Within educational settings though, Indigenous futurity is forced to navigate through structures and systems that were built upon the logics of settler futurity (Kulago, 2019, p. 243).

I argue that we have seen the devastating impact of such a system that has failed to educate a nation of the importance and value of Indigenous futurity through the devastating results of the 2023 referendum (where Australia voted "no" to altering the constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to parliament) (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023). After an intense period of misinformation and deficit being openly and repeatedly shared in the media, it is evident that we have been exposed to an extended period of white subject privilege. I deeply believe that if truth-telling in schools had been implemented long ago, or even when called for by the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* in 2017, the referendum would have been more likely to succeed and align with the interests of Indigenous futurity. Despite the ongoing negativity being faced by Indigenous students in schools in the wake of this referendum, the young people I engaged with in this study remained hopeful and believed that through leaning into the principles of self-determination and codesign in education, we can ensure Indigenous futurity is enshrined in education.

Theoretical underpinning – bringing IST and decoloniality together

Embracing my own "Indigenous standpoint" as a theoretical lens is an empowering way to signify and legitimise the value of my knowledge production as both an Indigenous researcher and educator, as I bring my own lived experience into this space as a form of resistance and emancipation (Rigney, 2017). Indigenous standpoint theory (IST) research is driven by Rigney's three principles for Indigenist research, and these are enacted in the following way in this study:

1. **Resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research** (Rigney, 2017, p. 42). In this study, the emancipatory imperative is evident through the identification of coloniality in subject English and addressing how this impacts English teacher practices and student experiences. This will inform future change that could liberate English classrooms from colonial domination.

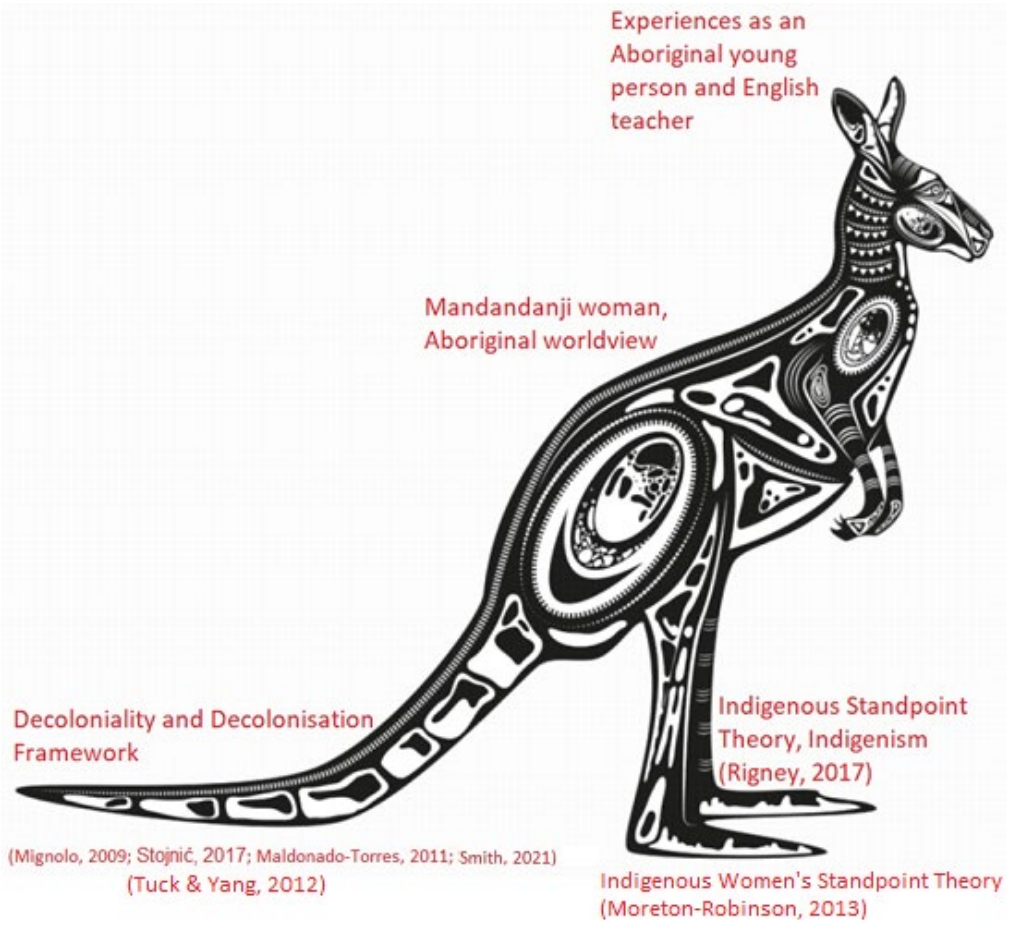
2. **Political integrity in Indigenist research** (Rigney, 2017, p. 43). This study, being built upon the principles of self-determination, ensures that the research honours Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty when engaging with both teachers and students about their teaching and learning experiences.
3. **Privileging Indigenous voices in research** (Rigney, 2017, p. 44). Due to the history of exclusion of Indigenous voices in research, IST studies disrupt this absence by centring perspectives previously rendered "voiceless" in the academy due to colonial dominance and omission. This study "gives a voice to the voiceless" (Rigney, 2017, p. 44) in how it encourages Indigenous students to share their experiences in an English classroom to inform future change.

Evidently, centring Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing in education research can challenge old problems and questions while finding new answers and solutions (Shay et al., 2022). Additionally, being an Aboriginal woman, Moreton-Robinson's (2013) work on Australian Indigenous women's standpoint as a methodological tool, resonated with me. Moreton-Robinson (2013) suggests that to be an Indigenous woman, this standpoint is "ascribed through inheritance and achieved through struggle" (p. 340). Aboriginal women who conduct research are always aware of how our lives have been shaped by "the omnipresence of patriarchal white sovereignty and its continual denial of our sovereignty" (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 340) and this has impacted my approach to the colonial structures in subject English.

In addition to IST, this paper and the broader PhD study recognises that coloniality is still in a powerful position in English curricula (Yiannakis, 2014). Therefore, through this research, decolonial inquiry can occur which questions how Western philosophy limits the presence of others' worldviews within classrooms (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). To engage in this type of decolonial inquiry, Mignolo (2009) suggests one can "delink" from Western epistemological assumptions through "epistemic disobedience"; this disobedience argues against the believed universality of European reason and thought, and its positioning as a globalised, ideal system that renders Indigenous peoples as "less than human" (p. 174). The establishment of the racialised "other" as lower than human suggests that the only "real" humans are white Christians, highlighting how the project of modernity is impacted by power-based relationships that rely on maintaining this dehumanisation (Stojnić, 2017, p. 106). This theoretical thinking has informed and framed this research and its intent to interrogate the Eurocentric nature of English curricula.

I have visually represented in Figure 1 the complimentary theoretical underpinnings of this paper, IST and decoloniality, through the Mandandanji totem, the Red Kangaroo.

Figure 1: Image created to show how IST/Indigenous women's standpoint theory and decoloniality/decolonisation work as complimentary theoretical frameworks in my study



The strong legs represent Indigenous standpoint theory and Indigenous women's standpoint theory, grounded in Indigenism, which is concerned with privileging the diversity of Indigenous experiences (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Rigney, 2017). The tail represents decoloniality theory and decolonisation (Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2021; Stojnić, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The tail of a kangaroo stops the kangaroo moving backwards; it can only move forward. This is in line with the imperatives of decolonisation, decoloniality and the epistemic delinking from colonial logics that this study calls for as we move forward away from colonial dominance (Mignolo, 2009). Near the heart of the kangaroo is my positionality and worldview. Through embracing my Indigenous standpoint to engage in decolonisation work, my research is always informed by my Aboriginality and my communal responsibilities, how I see the world (Moreton-Robinson, 2013), and how my research is my way to engage in resistance and emancipation (Rigney, 2017). Near the eyes of the kangaroo, you have my experiences that have shaped my view of the need for this research. My lived experiences as an Aboriginal student, teacher and researcher have fuelled my desire to liberate all student populations from being overwhelmed with colonial texts in subject English.

Methodology

This collective case-study research across three private school sites within South East Queensland provides insight into each group within their context and offers points of similarity and difference across the groups (Au & Blake, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Stake, 1995).

It is significant to note that Queensland was home to the strongest rejection of the 2023 referendum to enshrine an Indigenous voice to parliament, with 69% voting "no", making the state the leading no vote, higher than any state or territory (Dennien, 2023). This impacted the climate and culture of the schools and the experiences of Indigenous students who participated in the study. The preliminary findings from two schools reported on in this paper (the third school had not yet completed this phase of the data collection at the time of writing this paper) begin to evidence how co-created visions for the future can improve teaching and learning experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in subject English. These took place in sessions that occurred after the 2023 referendum.

Methods

To answer the overarching research question, "How can the principles of self-determination and codesign influence how subject English teachers in private schools embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and perspectives?", this study engaged with three private schools across urban South East Queensland.

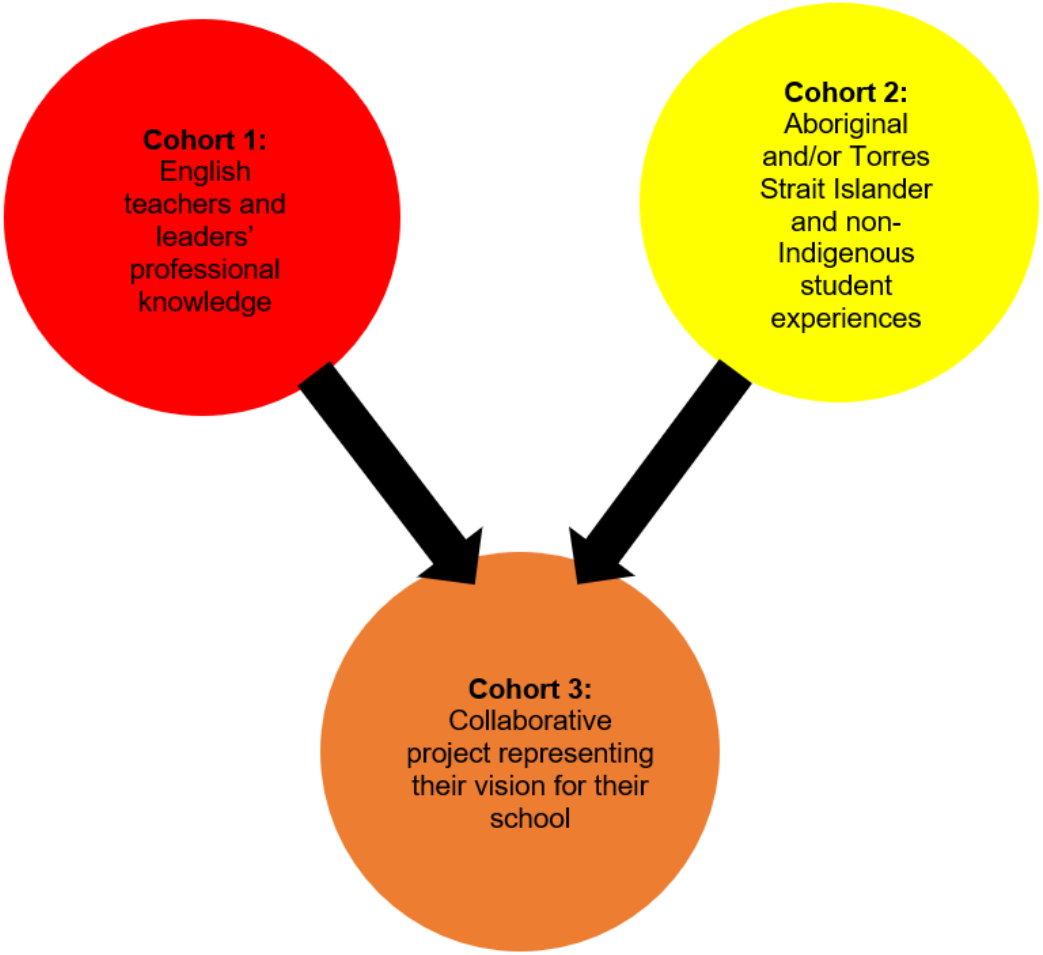
Across all three schools, three cohorts were involved and they were identified as:

1. subject English teachers and leaders
2. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students of subject English
3. subject English teachers and leaders together with their Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Cohorts

This paper, due to its focus on utilising Indigenous literature as an opportunity to engage with truth-telling and to secure the place of Indigenous futurity in classrooms, will report on the data from Cohort 3. This cohort captures the voices and visions of both teachers and students involved in this study, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Visual representation of the study's investigation into urban private schools' embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and perspectives when informed by principles of self-determination and codesign



The methods utilised for Cohort 3 reflected a hybrid approach. Storyboarding was the primary way of recording data due to the nature of activities included in this data collection (Shay 2016; 2021). While audio-recording was utilised in previous activities with Cohorts 1 and 2, the creation of a shared vision is inherently collaborative; therefore, the alternative of creative engagement was utilised with Cohort 3 to honour this process and these sessions were not audio-recorded (Shay, 2021). Teachers were positioned in the role of observer and guide (when needed) as student voices and perspectives were privileged in the design of a creative project. With this cohort, yarning circles were utilised to share stories and ideas; this allowed for relaxed and informal discussion where participants could discuss topics of interest relevant to the research study (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). All participants were asked to position themselves and articulate their standpoint (cultural heritage, connection to country and cultural knowledge) to foster a shared understanding of how all of their various knowledges could intersect and enable this collaborative task (Harding, 2004; Manathunga et al., 2020; Nakata, 2007). The participants were then asked to share their understanding of current practice within their current school context and creatively construct a representation of future practice for their current school context, informed by the principles of self-determination and codesign (such principles were articulated by the Indigenous students in each group and these varied in each school).

Findings and discussion

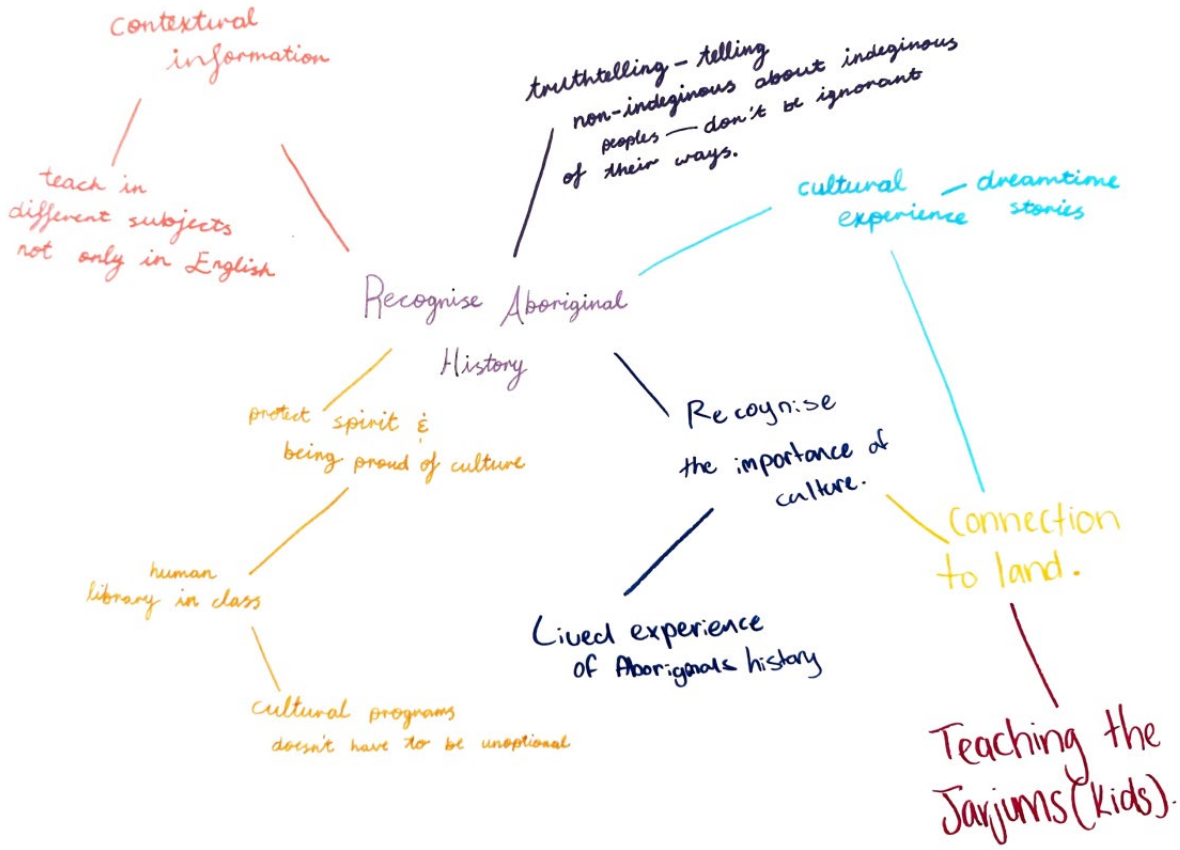
The following section shares some of the creative visions of the future of English from two out of the three schools in the study. The names of participants have been changed for anonymity; Indigenous participants' respective mobs are not included and non-Indigenous participants' heritages are also not included for further anonymity (signified by asterisks*). These creative works exemplify how education can actively pursue decolonisation, as the creation of these artefacts required openness, generosity, self-critique, and a high level of reflexivity from both teachers and students. To produce these aspirational visions, all of the participants needed to carefully and considerately interrogate their own standpoints, cultural knowledge, geographies and histories, and to contemplate how these interrelate and are intertwined (Harding, 2004; Manathunga et al., 2020; Nakata, 2007). This ultimately engages with notions of Indigenous futurity as a form of activism and resistance, as each group prioritised the presence and value of Indigenous peoples and literature in how they produced knowledge about and envisioned the future (Eglash et al., 2020; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2018; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

School 1 middle school students

In School 1, the first focus group consisted of three middle school students, including one year 7 Aboriginal student, one year 7 non-Indigenous student, and one year 9 Aboriginal student, and two non-Indigenous English teachers. The preliminary discussion was led by year 7 Aboriginal student Elise*. Elise told her teachers what was most important to her when Indigenous perspectives are embedded in the classroom. Elise described that teachers must emphasise why Indigenous perspectives are important. Additionally, she explained that it is not enough to simply mention Indigenous perspectives and move on—teachers must emphasise why they are valuable.

Elise's statement empowered Lisa*, the year 9 Aboriginal student, to speak up and state that she believed a lot of her non-Indigenous peers did not know the true history of Australia. She continued to explain that if her non-Indigenous peers were to develop a deeper understanding of our nation's history, they would understand why this history is so important. As evident in Figure 3, these points of discussion started to forge branches of what the students believe English teachers need to consider in their future planning when embedding Indigenous perspectives.

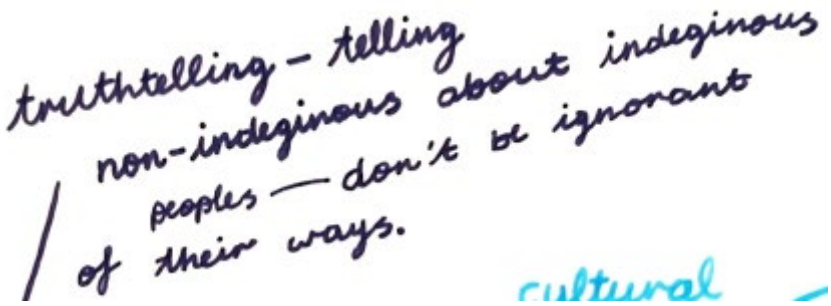
Figure 3. School 1 middle school focus group's co-created vision for their school's future embedding of Indigenous perspectives in subject English



The students placed "recognise Aboriginal history" as the central focus of this vision; this prompted discussions about why it is essential that Indigenous culture is recognised and valued. This encouraged year 7 non-Indigenous student Aliesha* to share her viewpoint as to why valuing various Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing is critical for non-Indigenous students. Aliesha explained that non-Indigenous students must connect what they are learning to the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. Aliesha said that this is essential as "non-Indigenous Australians need to realise the horrible things that we have done to Aboriginal people". This prompted a sigh of relief from Lisa who said, "This is the first non-Indigenous person I have heard talk about this proppa way" (the inspiration for this paper's title). The teachers in this focus group, in their role as observers and guides, immediately saw the impact that this truth-telling had on the Indigenous students in this group.

This discussion resulted in "truth-telling" emerging as a branch in the vision, written by Aliesha, as shown in detail in Figure 4.

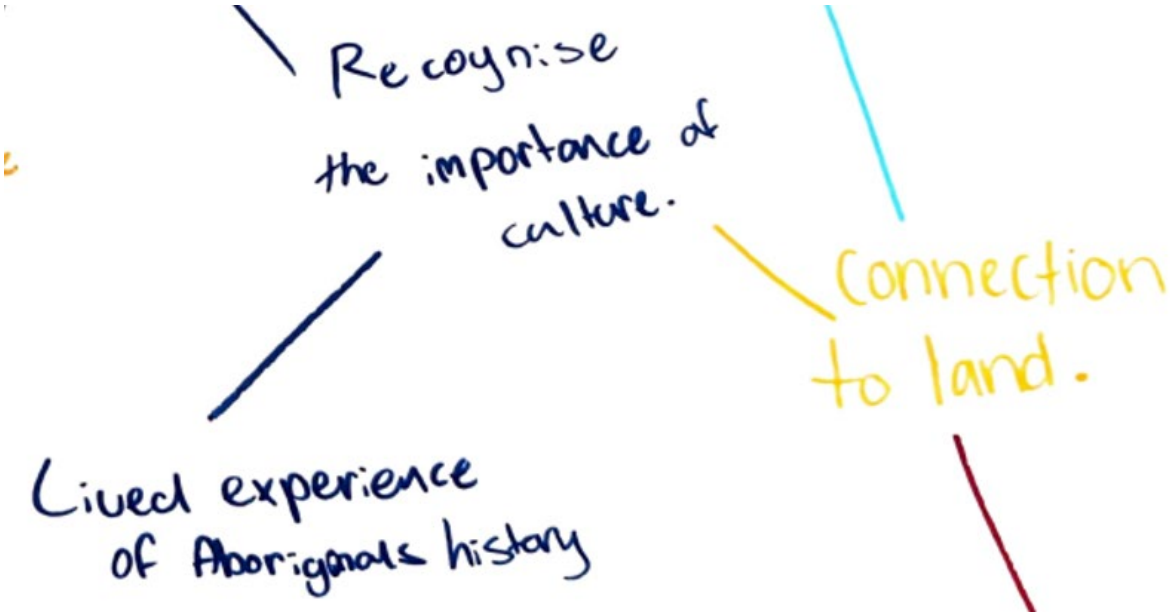
Figure 4. Truth-telling branch (extracted from School 1 middle school focus group's co-created vision)



These insights of year 7 and year 9 students are powerful and speak to the strength of our young people and their ability to imagine alternative futures for Indigenous peoples (Fredericks et al., 2020). The imperative "don't be ignorant of their ways" links directly to the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Barr et al., 2008), which emphasises that all Australian children need to "understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians" (p. 8). The pursuit of reconciliation should foster allyship by valuing and giving voice to Indigenous perspectives; engaging with truth-telling for this purpose enriches all learners' understanding of our intersected histories (White, 2016).

When discussing how literature could be used for this kind of truth-telling, the branch "lived experience of Aboriginal history" was written as an extension of how Australians should "recognise the importance of culture", as shown in detail in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Importance of culture branch (extracted from School 1 middle school focus group's co-created vision)



The students agreed that it was more impactful to read and learn from stories of lived experiences written by First Nations peoples. Stories of survival and strength inherently draw on ancient cultural traditions, as well on as contemporary Indigenous knowledges, that speak back to injustice and power imbalances (Manathunga et al., 2020; Moreton, 2006). The dialogue that can be facilitated through texts such as this promotes connection and knowledge sharing between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians (Manathunga et al., 2020). This decolonial thinking combined with the Indigenous standpoint and voices of the young people in this study embodies the desire for truth-telling that has been long called for, capturing "our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination" (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017).

School 1 senior school students

In School 1, the second focus group consisted of four senior school students, including one year 10 Aboriginal student, one year 10 non-Indigenous student, and two Aboriginal year 11 students, and one non-Indigenous English teacher. Similar to the first focus group, the importance of culture and the necessity of this being recognised as valuable was central to our discussion. When discussing cultural knowledge, all three Aboriginal students outlined they were very connected to the cultural ways of their mob and respective communities. When discussing how this could inform the embedding of Indigenous perspectives within their current school context in subject English, year 10 Aboriginal student Jessica* talked about how she learns from her family and elders by sitting around a camp-fire and listening as stories are shared. She shared her joy at the prospect of the school potentially introducing cultural experiences, such as yarning circles, for all students to engage with. This informed the design of the artefact in Figure 6: a circle with layers of considerations for teachers when engaging with Indigenous content.

Figure 6. School 1 senior school focus group's co-created vision for their school's future embedding of Indigenous perspectives in subject English

The layers of consideration for teachers within this circle (moving from the centre outwards) are detailed below in quotation marks, with additional explanations following:

- "Cultural knowledge" – As discussed, all students agreed this should be prioritised, legitimised, valued and considered as central to all embedding of Indigenous perspectives.
- "The way students learn (hands-on)" – This refers to the participating Indigenous students' self-identified learning style.
- "The way teachers teach (acknowledge – include and treat equal)" – This refers to how Indigenous content is engaged with and how Indigenous students are treated in the classroom.
- "Student check-ins (the day before, so Indigenous students don't feel put on the spot)" – This refers to when Indigenous content is going to be taught.
- "Non-Indigenous students' awareness (inclusivity, understanding – school culture, teachers, students)" – This is addressing the participating students' perception of a lack of awareness in their non-Indigenous peers that is causing racism.
- "Background and context learning – true history of Australia being taught consistently (even when uncomfortable)" – This refers to the pre-reading learning activities the participants believe should take place before engaging with Indigenous literature.
- "Cultural learning through reading – prevents racism and promotes reconciliation – addresses cultural assumptions and stereotypes, promotes positivity" – This refers to the during-reading learning activities, as all participating students said that engagement with Indigenous literature should centre cultural knowledge in order to address issues of racism.

Pertinent to this paper's discussion of truth-telling and Indigenous futurity was the ability of these young people to articulate the necessity of engaging with the "true history of Australia" consistently "even when uncomfortable". Their ability to identify how much the silences in curricula speak is incredibly mature and insightful; when truth-telling is absent, arguably, the gaps communicate as surely as the presences (Justice, 2018). In line with this, all four students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, identified that reading Indigenous literature offers opportunities to address issues of racism they had all experienced within their school context. Stories can either "strengthen, wound, or seemingly erase our humanity and shared connections" (Justice, 2018, p. 183; Thomson, 2024). The way these stories are "expressed or repressed, shared, or hidden, recognised or dismissed" (Justice, 2018, pp. 183–184) has implications for how students perceive the positioning of Indigenous peoples within society; in particular, it impacts non-Indigenous students' comprehension of our nation's history and its legacy (Thomson, 2024). All three Aboriginal students advocated for the importance of Indigenous culture being shared across generations, as the knowledges they embody are community-based and future-oriented (Manathunga et al., 2020) and these could only benefit their non-Indigenous peers. Their argument that these knowledges, and how they were impacted by colonisation, must be taught consistently "even when uncomfortable" problematised colonial agendas; this argument advocates for decolonial approaches to truth-telling (Manathunga et al., 2022).

Engaging in what the students referred to as "cultural learning through reading" is reminiscent of Jessica's experience of learning from the story-sharing of her family and elders. Storytelling is an Indigenous pedagogy that "sustains communities, validates experiences and epistemologies, expresses

experiences of Indigenous peoples, and nurtures relationships and the sharing of knowledge" (Iseke, 2013, p. 559; Manathunga et al., 2022). By engaging in Indigenous story-sharing in a classroom, Indigenous knowledge can disrupt and refuse Australia's archaic colonial narratives (Manathunga et al., 2022). This co-created aspirational vision of a decolonised curricula, driven by IST, calls for cognitive justice that addresses racism while beginning to address other issues of inclusion, diversity, equality and social justice (de Sousa Santos, 2014; 2018; Manathunga et al., 2022); if realised, Indigenous futurity could be realised in Australian English classrooms.

School 2 middle school students

In School 2, the first focus group consisted of middle school students, including four year 8 non-Indigenous students and one non-Indigenous English teacher. It is important to note that this focus group of non-Indigenous participants was formed because this year 8 Extension English class had just completed a unit on the novel *Terra Nullius* by Claire G. Coleman and had lots to offer regarding the impact of this text and its truth-telling, as shown in Figure 7. While this text is a fictional depiction of a futuristic colonisation, its engagement with Indigenous perspectives and the trauma, resilience and strength of First Nations peoples resonated with the students.

Figure 7. School 2 middle school focus group's co-created vision for their school's future embedding of Indigenous perspectives in subject English

Prior to this focus group session, I had spoken with the students' English teacher Joshua* about why he had chosen this text. Joshua had been actively seeking a text by an Indigenous author for his extension

class, as he was eager to Indigenise and decolonise his teaching and to disrupt Eurocentric perspectives in the curriculum (de Sousa Santos 2014; 2018; Manathunga et al., 2020). When researching the novel *Terra Nullius*, he had seen that it was largely used as a text for seniors but found a recommendation that said it could be used with year 8s. As he was confident in the maturity level of his students in his year 8 class, he pitched this text to his head of department. This took a level of trust in his students and, as the students go on to articulate, this trust was well placed.

All four students commented on how their outlook had been transformed by their engagement with this novel. They had developed sophisticated understandings of the true history of Australia and the ongoing impacts of colonialism on First Nations peoples (such as intergenerational trauma, dispossession, and loss of culture, land and language). When we discussed decolonisation, all students agreed that these learning activities could achieve this and serve as meaningful opportunities for reconciliation. When looking back on their prior engagement with Indigenous perspectives in school, they expressed feelings of feeling lied to and were disappointed that their primary school teachers had not told them the true history of Australia prior to this. They shared how important it is for teachers to trust their students and their maturity levels, as shown in detail in Figure 8. They said their approach to and engagement with this Indigenous text was not only supported by their teacher's trust in their maturity level, but the sufficient time that Mr Bell* spent on contextualising important background information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories and cultures.

Figure 8. Emphasis on the importance of trust and maturity when engaging with truth-telling during the context phase of a unit (extracted from School 2 middle school focus group's co-created vision)

This period spent in contextual learning, as depicted in Figure 8, not only holistically engaged the students in truth-telling, but also fostered their sense of respect and understanding of Indigenous communities. Knowing the true history of Australia, the students explained that engaging with this text not only enhanced their understanding of literary devices and texts, but it also developed their sense of empathy, as they were positioned to adopt an empathetic reading lens. Further, this solidified their sense of allyship with First Nations peoples, as they had a better understanding of colonialism and its ongoing impacts. This response is shown in detail in Figure 9.

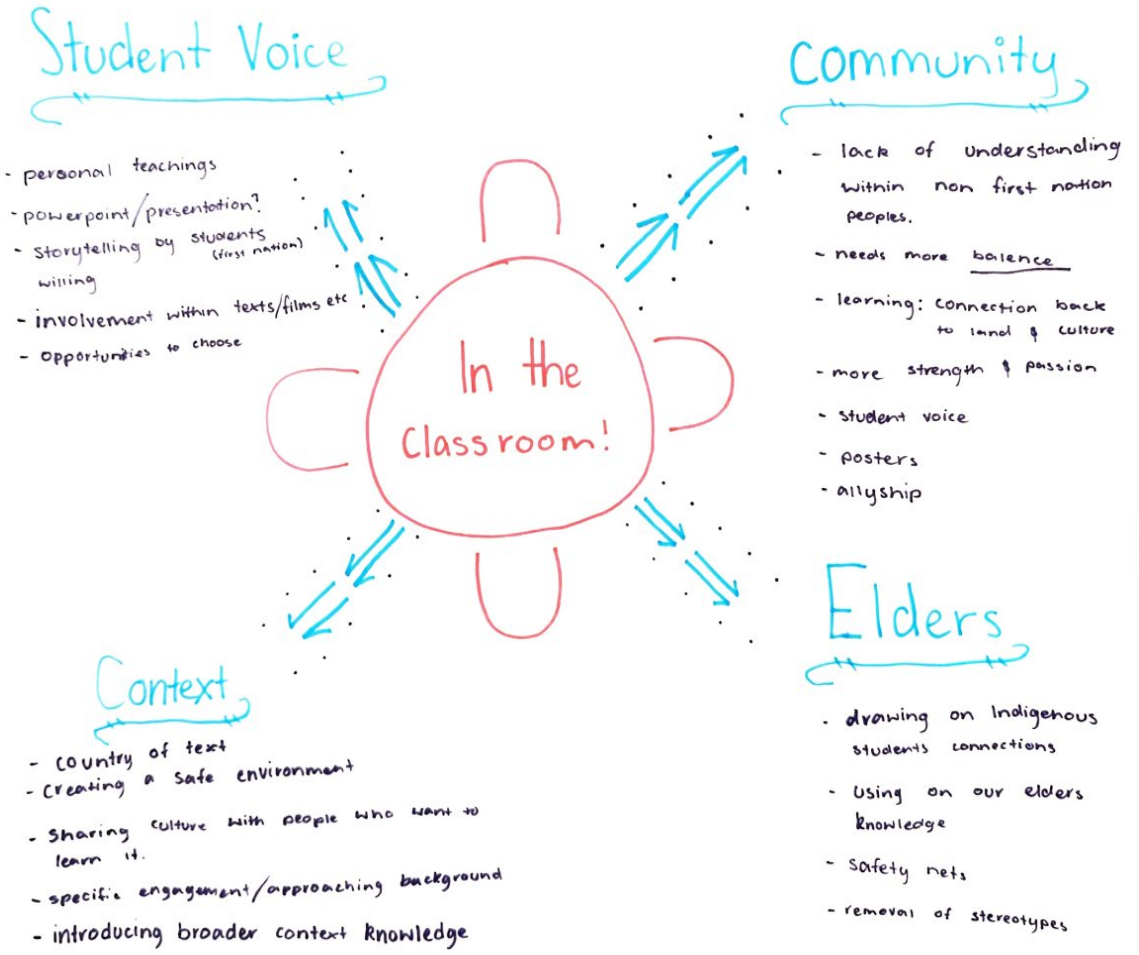
Figure 9. Emphasis on how engaging with Indigenous literature fostered a sense of allyship, understanding, empathy and understanding of how literary devices positioned the readers (extracted from School 2 middle school focus group's co-created vision)

All four students could articulate the dual benefits of this unit—both in how it fostered their empathetic reading lens and enhanced their understanding of literary devices. This decolonial approach to curricula is rich with opportunities to "bridge the gap" of understanding between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. This is only possible through creating an invitation for non-Indigenous students to engage with First Nations peoples' ways of being and knowing (Manathunga et al., 2022), and notions of Indigenous futurity. As evidenced by the students' vibrant, colourful and enthusiastic approach to the creation of their artefact, the learning opportunities facilitated by their teacher with Indigenous literature were clearly transformational.

School 2 senior school students

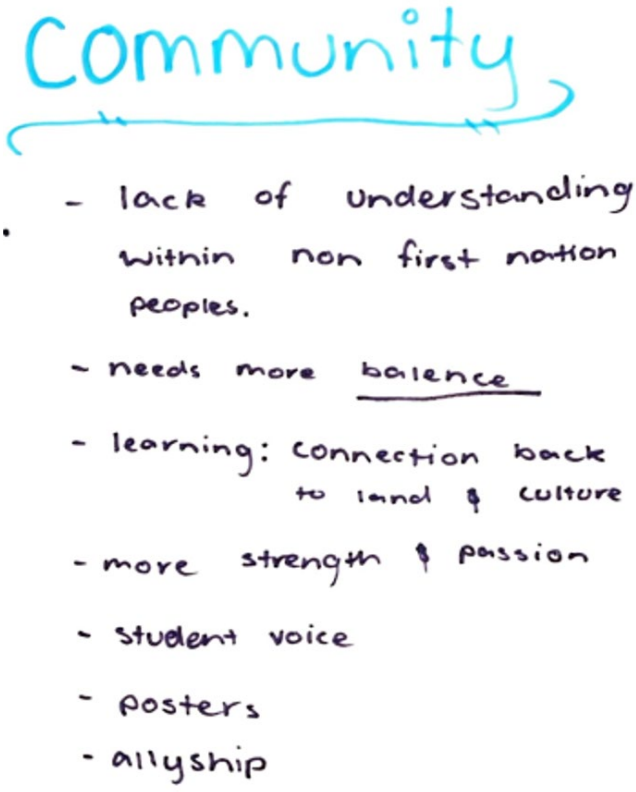
In School 2, the second focus group consisted of senior school students, including three year 11 Aboriginal students, two non-Indigenous English teachers and one Aboriginal English teacher. Similar to School 1, the students believed culture should be central to how Indigenous perspectives are embedded in subject English. As shown in Figure 10, the three Aboriginal students all agreed that the school could and should utilise their voices and the voices of their families, elders and communities when providing cultural experiences in the classroom.

Figure 10. School 2 senior school focus group's co-created vision for their school's future embedding of Indigenous perspectives in subject English



All three students were from different strands of subject English: Essential, General and Extension. Lily*, an Aboriginal student in Extension English, was studying Indigenous poetry at the time of this focus group. When asked if she was enjoying the unit, she expressed that she was, however, she was concerned that she was only engaging with negative representations of the devastating impacts of colonisation on First Nations peoples. She acknowledged that while this is important and essential, there should be more of a balance and that the strength of our culture should also be presented so as not to perpetuate stereotypes or continually represent Indigenous peoples as victims. This was represented in the "community" branch of the vision, as shown in detail in Figure 11, as she expressed that she wanted to see more of what she knew of her own community and culture represented in the classroom.

Figure 11. Emphasis on how engaging with conceptions of Indigenous community promotes a balance between celebrating culture and engaging in truth-telling (extracted from School 2 senior school focus group's co-created vision)



Lily's experience of Indigenous poetry emphasises the need to ensure the representations of Indigeneity that are embedded in the classroom resonate with Indigenous students. It has been said that while truth-telling is a necessity and is powerful, it can be a difficult and painful process if we are constantly positioned to relive the trauma of our past (Manathunga et al., 2022). Reviews of the Australian Curriculum advocate for the need for this "balance" that Lily hopes to see in her future classroom. Embedding of Indigenous perspectives have been critiqued for consistently not representing First Nations peoples' meaningful contributions to contemporary Australia; not showcasing the sophisticated social, economic and political systems of First Nations peoples; and not recognising First Nations peoples as the world's oldest continuing culture (Manathunga et al., 2022).

The teachers in the focus group, in their role as observers and guides, contributed to this discussion and agreed that, while poetry can be used to address ongoing injustice, work through trauma and promote truth-telling (Atkinson, 2000), it must also celebrate the strength of Indigenous culture and sovereignty. This ensures that reciprocal and strengths-based relationships can be forged between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as we redress the history of colonisation and build upon the principles of self-determination, justice and recognition (Manathunga et al., 2020). Embracing strengths-based literature can be healing while drawing attention to our layers of skill and knowledge and our connection to country (Manathunga et al., 2020). Embracing such texts legitimises Indigenous futurity and promotes the development of decolonial curricula as non-Indigenous people are positioned to recognise and embrace our sovereignties (Manathunga et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the conceptualised visions for the future of subject English in this paper emphasise that participating students believe that teachers' approaches to and engagement with texts impact how students understand First Nations and colonialist histories, the intersections of these histories and the long-lasting legacy of both. The students believe this should be at the forefront of the minds of all English educators as they seek to decolonise the agenda of education. This paper's key findings have emerged from the collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students together with their teachers. The students' suggestions for the future enactment of subject English could have tangible impacts when attempting to secure the place of Indigenous futurity in Australian classrooms; these key suggestions follow:

- English teachers must emphasise why Indigenous perspectives are important and valuable.
- Non-Indigenous students must know the true history of Australia and recognise the ongoing impacts of colonialism through truth-telling.
- Lived experiences of First Nations peoples, particularly of survival and strength, should be engaged with in English in order to celebrate our ongoing culture and knowledges.
- Indigenous cultural knowledge should be at the centre of embedding of Indigenous perspectives.
- The true history of Australia must be taught consistently, even when uncomfortable.
- Opportunities must be provided for students to engage in cultural learning through reading Indigenous literature.
- English teachers must trust their students' maturity levels when engaging with Indigenous content, while also spending sufficient time contextualising important background information about Indigenous peoples, histories and cultures.
- Reading Indigenous literature should foster students' sense of respect for and understanding of Indigenous communities, enhance students' understanding of literary devices and texts, and promote a sense of allyship as a result of an improved understanding of colonialism and its ongoing impacts.
- The voices of Indigenous students, families, elders and communities should be utilised when providing cultural experiences in the classroom.
- Indigenous literature in English should present a balanced representation of both the devastating impacts of colonisation as well as the strength of our culture.

Arguably, these suggestions have emerged due to how the students in these focus groups challenged and disrupted colonial structures present in the curriculum (Hogarth, 2017). Assessing and advocating for the disruption of these structures strongly signals for the need to centre Indigenous voices and perspectives in our curriculum (Hogarth, 2017).

It is imperative that students' experiences of Indigenous content are understood, as this will inform how teachers can engage in truth-telling proppa way and how Indigenous futurity can be legitimised within classrooms. This paper has suggested that truth-telling is a necessary and integral part of all conceptions of Indigenous futurity, but this must be balanced with healing and celebrations of culture. Ultimately, truth-telling can disrupt the dominance of colonialism and prioritise Indigenous futurity in Australian English classrooms, but it can also foster reciprocal relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, promote allyship and empathy, and ultimately shape how our young people produce knowledge about solutions-oriented approaches and our futures.

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