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Envisioning Indigenous education sovereignty through story: Our education, our way

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Within an Aboriginal community in so-called Australia, conversations of education sovereignty are being held. These conversations, as part of my doctoral research, are envisioning an educational future outside of colonial-controlled schooling, an educational future grounded in Indigenous knowledges. In recognition that education has been occurring here, very successfully, for tens of thousands of years, community members share their vision for Indigenous futurities, looking at the patterns of the past to prepare for the future. Envisioning education sovereignty creates time and space to think deeply about the future, and to embrace ancient educational practices that our ancestors would recognise. These conversations do not subscribe to Western notions of "progress", nor start from a premise that colonial rule is ever-lasting. This research contends with Indigenous education sovereignty for our grandchildren's grandchildren. Some findings from this research are shared here, in the form of a story, as a decolonial approach to centre Indigenous knowledges and methodologies. This story—"Our Education, Our Way"—presents a vision for what education could look and feel like, and has implications for the way formal education currently functions.

Keywords: Indigenous futurities, decolonial approach, storying, Indigenous education sovereignty, envisioning, anonymity

Introduction

Close your eyes. Feel your ribs rise as you take a big breath. What does the future look like for our young ones? For those in the deep future yet to join us?

This article presents research findings from D'harawal Country in south-west Sydney (see also Bishop, 2021; 2022; 2023) where Indigenous community members were asked: What could education look and feel like, grounded in Indigenous knowledges? Currently, in so-called Australia, the future looks bleak for many Indigenous students without significant and systemic change to the way education operates. Schools are known to be sites of harm for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Moodie et al., 2019; Shay & Lampert, 2020), and yet Indigenous peoples have been practising education here for tens of thousands of years, very successfully. In applying Indigenous, decolonising, and relational theories and methodologies to the dissemination of findings, this paper uses story to re-present (in part[1]) a vision of Indigenous education sovereignty.

[1] Findings are also re-presented through a series of intergenerational letters, spanning through time between ancestors and young people, grandmothers and granddaughters. The letters contain quotes from participants who wished to be named as part of layering the community vision, to be discussed below (Bishop, 2024).

This paper will start by positioning myself and the research before discussing my methodological approach, which includes Indigenous futurities[2] and envisioning. I will then move into how this research prioritises relationality to "layer the vision" shared by community, including decisions made to prioritise and protect participant anonymity. Finally, I look to Indigenous scholarship on "story" as a way to re-present "findings"[3] before finishing with a story of Indigenous futurities—"Our Education, Our Way".

Who am I?

> "As Indigenous researchers, we speak from somewhere, notably from relations with the natural world, our ancestors and other Indigenous peoples. We speak out of histories of colonization and genocide, survival and struggle" (Coburn et al., 2013, p. 5).

My name is Michelle and I am a Gamilaroi woman, grown up on D'harawal Country in so-called Australia, a term often used by Indigenous scholars to point out the illegal occupation of the settler-colonial state now commonly referred to as Australia (Day, 2021; Worrell, 2023). The lands, rivers, mountains, skies—everything—have always had their own names, stories and knowledges (Barrowcliffe, 2021) and using the term "so-called Australia" shows the falsehood of this nation-state predicated on the myth of *terra nullius* ("land belonging to no-one") (Carlson & Farrelly, 2023).

I have been raised primarily by strong, staunch Aboriginal women and identify as a granddaughter, daughter, mother, aunty, sister, niece, partner and kin relation to many communities across so-called Australia. I am keen on education as it has been done here forever to strengthen Indigenous sovereignty and restore the balance between country[2], human and more-than-human kin after these last couple of centuries of exploitation, toxicity and extinction (Feirer, 2021; A. S. Smith et al., 2021). I am deeply fearful of the intergenerational implications of such widespread destruction (and denial) and the toll it is taking on the minds and bodies of all life. This sentiment is shared by Dharug[3] scholar Jo Rey (2024), who writes "combined, futures are looking grim; extinctions are looking inevitable" (p. 43). It is from this critical position that I write, albeit with an open heart and from a place of love.

You will notice throughout my purposeful disruption of standard academic conventions, including the very structure of what is considered an academic article. The linearity of sections such as literature review, methodology, findings and discussion will not be found here; these conscious decisions to defy the "norm" align with Indigenous, decolonial, and relational theories and methodologies (L. T. Smith, 2012). Furthermore, the final word in this paper belongs to the community through the story "Our Education, Our Way". This is a deliberate strategy that serves (at least) three functions: it offers agency to the reader to interpret and come to their own conclusions; it gives community the final word, not the researcher; and it allows the power of story to linger and resonate with the reader.

[2] My preference is always to capitalise country as a marker of respect and to show the magnitude of what 'country' represents (land, water, sky, animals, rocks, memories, ancestors and so much more), however in this article I adhere to the style guide which operates on minimal capitalisation. This is also the case when referring to elders and ancestors.

[3] I apply conscious citational practices which include introducing Indigenous scholars by their name and mob/country/tribal affiliations and prioritising Indigenous scholarship as a mark of respect.

More about this research

Hunched over fried rice and honey king prawns, yarning[4] with my family and elders who have grown me up, my PhD was envisaged. Eyes lit up as we talked about education our ancestors would recognise. About education outside of mainstream schooling, for our grandchildren's grandchildren. "This is needed everywhere!", they exclaimed. "We've got your back, we'll support you all the way." My shoulders fell from my ears as I exhaled deeply. I was on the right track.

As seen in the story shared above, this research came from community after swapping story after story of disappointment in the schooling system, with very few success stories. Our inclusion as Indigenous peoples in the institution of schooling in so-called Australia has always been fraught. Assimilation and dispossession through education is/was evident in education policies that continue to perpetuate colonial discourses (Brown, 2019; Hogarth, 2017). Indigenous students are often portrayed in education policy as the "problem", that is, "deficient when compared to other sections of the Australian population" (Patrick & Moodie, 2016, p. 180). There are real concerns among Indigenous communities that "schools can re-traumatise, re-marginalise and reproduce the conditions that have been historically exclusionary" (Shay & Lampert, 2020, p. 2). In other words, schooling continues to cause ongoing, systemic harm to many Indigenous students (Moodie et al., 2019). This is well-documented in the literature (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Lowe, 2017). Thus, this research does not contend with school reform, nor start from a premise that colonial rule is ever-lasting. Instead, an envisioning of Indigenous education sovereignty is prioritised as an urgent and necessary imperative (Bishop, 2021).

The research involves Indigenous people living, working, studying and/or connected to an Aboriginal community on D'harawal Country in south-west Sydney. Thirty-five people participated in an anonymous online survey and face-to-face yarns were held with over 15 people. Participants came from a range of ages, roles and education backgrounds. To be explained below, an exact figure is purposively withheld to protect anonymity. This enactment of refusal (A. Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014) demonstrates a relational accountability to the research participants who have participated on the promise of anonymity.

Likewise, I have chosen not to represent participant information in table form, in an effort to keep the people whole and not broken down into statistics via age or role. Indeed, the survey did not seek demographical information that served little to no purpose to the research question, such as, what is your gender? Instead, the survey was used as a relational adaptation and engagement tool to engage community (in response to impacts of COVID-19) and layer the community vision, not statistically report on how many participants identified as, for example, female. Thus, community voices and the knowledges, vision and critique shared by respondents were centred, rather than a collection of demographic information.

Indigenous futurities

> Can you imagine a world where nature is understood as full of relatives not resources, where inalienable rights are balanced with inalienable responsibilities and where wealth itself is measured not by resource ownership and control, but by the number of good relationships

[4] I use the Aboriginal English term "yarning" here to mean a conversation, led by elders, which shaped and guided this research. The term "yarning" also has deeper meanings, including "knowledge exchange that embodies the oral traditions of Indigenous cultures" (Shay, 2021, p. 63; see also Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Indigenous futurities refer to the "ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures" (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2019, p. 86). A section on Indigenous futurities features below. By "findings" I mean the gift of stories, knowledges and vision by participants.

> we maintain in the complex and diverse life-systems of this blue green planet? I can. (Wildcat, 2013, p. 515)

This research prioritised Indigenous futurities as a decolonial approach to create time and space for participants to deeply consider the future (and past/present as circular time). Aboriginal scholar Bronwyn Carlson (2024) writes unapologetically that "the future is definitely Indigenous" (p. 9). This staunch claim is in spite of the myriad attempts to eradicate us. As Carlson (2024) asserts, "Although we have been written out of most future thinking and planning across settler-colonial nations, we continue to imagine futures in which Indigenous peoples are thriving" (p. 9). This future can be seen in the opening quote by Daniel Wildcat (2013), a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma. Similarly, writing from their context in Turtle Island, Cherokee scholar Jeff Ganohalidoh Corntassel (2012) inspires a redirection towards Indigenous futurities as a way to divert from "contemporary shape-shifting colonialism" (p. 92) and, instead, think about our responsibilities to ancestors and future generations. Likewise, in so-called Australia, Gomeroi scholar Nikki Moodie (2018) insists that Indigenous futurities necessitate a "rejection of settler epistemologies" (p. 9) in recognition of the "possibilities of land-based pedagogies for reconnection, disruption and invention" (p. 9).

For Kanaka Maoli scholar Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2019), there are three distinct yet interwoven streams within Indigenous studies which focus explicitly on Indigenous future-making. These are Indigenous futurities (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013), Indigenous futurisms (Dillon, 2012) and Indigenous resurgence (L. B. Simpson, 2017). Indigenous futurities, states Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2019), are active and deliberate "ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures" (p. 86). Thus, Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2019) asserts, "futurity is not just another way to say 'the future'" (p. 86). In other words, Indigenous futurities are the "enactment of radical relationalities" (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, 2019, p. 86), whereby Indigenous knowledge systems are recalibrated to include our own imaginings and actions towards the future. Furthermore, Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2019) points to the critical scholarship of Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández[7] (2013), who critique the ways in which Indigenous futurities do not rely on the erasure of settlers, unlike settler futurities which are dependent on the elimination of Indigenous peoples.

Another future-making stream, Indigenous futurisms, is a term coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon (2012) in *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. In the introduction, Dillon (2012) asks "does sf [science fiction] have the capacity to envision Native futures, Indigenous hopes, and dreams recovered by rethinking the past in a new framework?" (p. 2). The work that follows answers this question with a resounding "yes". In so-called Australia, Koori/Goori scholar Mykeala Saunders (2022) edits the first anthology of Indigenous Australian speculative fiction (spec fic). These spec fic stories "take place outside the bounds of consensus reality, showcasing a variety of possible worlds, and they are all rooted in our ways of being, knowing, doing—or becoming" (Saunders, 2022, p. 14). Thus, Indigenous futurisms enact creative and staunch re-writing/s of our futures.

Indigenous resurgence is another future-making stream identified by Goodyear-Kaʻōpua (2019). Indigenous resurgence requires praxis as a matter of urgency in response to government intervention that systematically removes and dispossesses Indigenous peoples from our land (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, 2019; L. B. Simpson, 2017). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) sees radical Indigenous resurgence as critical for our survival to combat "dispossession of Indigenous peoples

from our grounded normativities through the processes of colonialism and now settler-colonialism" (p. 25).

According to *trawlwulwuy* scholar Emma Lee (2019) (writing with *tebrakunna* country as first author), as a person burdened with "extinction myths" (p. 419):

> Resurgence is especially important to *trawlwulwuy* peoples as it is a way to make sense of the things we have had lost and stolen, such as our very being, by renewing the relationship we have to our histories, practices, traditions and knowledges. (p. 420)

Indeed, Indigenous resurgence is a tactic to reclaim and enact our futures. Consequently, the scholarship around Indigenous future-making (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2019) has provided the impetus to prioritise envisioning Indigenous education sovereignty as a decolonising and future-focused endeavour in this research.

Envisioning

> "By asking 'How will your ancestors and future generations recognize you as Indigenous?', I offer a challenge for us to begin re-envisioning and practicing everyday acts of resurgence" (Corntassel, 2012, p. 88).

Envisioning is a decolonising process which centres Indigenous sovereignties and futurities. It is about creating time and space to think deeply, about all-time, future, past and present. From my perspective, time is not linear or organised into a neat timeline (Bawaka Country et al., 2017); all elements of time inform the envisioning process. For example, as indicated in the quote above, how can our responsibilities to ancestors and future generations inform envisioning Indigenous futurities? What about the dystopian reality we exist in today? Such questions prompt consideration about the futures we want for our grandchildren's grandchildren.

Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) acknowledges envisioning as an effective strategy used by Indigenous people to bring us together and think outside our everyday realities, which are "generally depressing" (p. 153). Similarly, L. B. Simpson (2008a) emphasises the "importance of visioning and dreaming a better future based on our own Indigenous traditions" (p. 82). Meanwhile, Sámi scholar Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) focuses on the crucial role that Indigenous women play in "envisioning models of autonomy that do not merely replicate patriarchal, hierarchical structures that often reproduce the marginalization and subjugation of sections of society" (p. 2). For Indigenous scholars Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy and Megan Bang (2019), envisioning Indigenous futures is a way for communities to enact sovereignty. Thus, envisioning is a way to "take control of our destinies" (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. 143) and move beyond what Māori scholar Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2003) terms a "politics of distraction" (p. 2).

This distraction, invoked by Western systems and structures of power, is a form of violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples, where we are compelled to respond to settler demands, often voluntarily, which takes time, energy and seemingly infinite emotional labour (Menzel & Bennett, 2024). Such purposeful, everyday acts of colonialism make envisioning seem impossible, with G. H. Smith (2003) reminding us that "one of the important elements of colonization is the diminishment of the indigenous ability to actually imagine freedom or a utopian vision free of the oppressor" (p. 3). L. B. Simpson (2008b) agrees, stating that "too often in contemporary times we are presented with a worldview that renders us

incapable of visioning any alternatives to our present situation and relationship with colonial governments and settler states" (p. 38).

In this research, envisioning is used as an approach to move away from discussions of school reform and, instead, look to the educational practices of our ancestors to help shape and guide the direction of education into the future. From this place of responsibility and accountability, envisioning creates infinite possibilities which render questions of technicalities, practicalities, feasibility and logistics as irrelevant. Envisioning allows the smile to spread when thinking about your great-great-great grannies into the future and what education should *feel* like. In this way, envisioning opens "imaginative and creative spaces in which Indigenous families and communities are engaged as dreamers, nation-builders and future elders" (Bang et al., 2019, p. 792). However, it should be noted that envisioning is not about individuals; to "envision is guided by creating a purpose-driven framework which, we argue, relates to community self-determination" (Brayboy & Bang, 2019, p. 2). In this research, collective envisioning is re-presented by layering the community vision.

Layering the vision

> "When relationality is privileged, knowledge production is collective, and, in that sense deeper, purposeful and respectful" (Shotton et al., 2018, p. 639).

"Layering the vision" is a term I use to indicate the structural considerations made to re-present research findings respectfully. It means accepting multiple truths about what Indigenous education sovereignty could look like; there are no wrong answers and no universal "truth". In this research, each participant's response contributes to the infinite intersecting and interconnected patterns that inform the future, adding to a bigger, collective community vision of what Indigenous education sovereignty could look like. Layering the vision draws on Indigenous, decolonising, and relational theories and methodologies to find creative and innovative ways to write up the findings (i.e., collective envisioning) to honour the knowledges shared in the research. Layering the vision is also cyclical. It builds upon the knowledges of our ancestors; contributes to the staunch scholarship by Indigenous peoples all over the world; responds to the solid, sovereign work being done every day in communities; and looks deep into our Indigenous futurities—before coming back round again.

The concept of layering the vision came during "data analysis" where, using the Kin and Country Framework (Bishop & Tynan, forthcoming), the perspectives of Eagle, Ant, Grandmother and Granddaughter shaped and informed the re-presentation of findings. Although my doctoral research contained two creative outputs[5], which layer the vision from participants, this paper focuses on one—the story "Our Education, Our Way". The story is about a community coming together to discuss their future/s and includes 58 direct and indirect quotes from anonymous participants, including 35 survey respondents and participants from one yarn. An exact number of participants involved in this yarn is purposively excluded to protect anonymity. As mentioned above, this is a responsibility I take very seriously.

Protecting anonymity

[5]As mentioned above, a series of intergenerational letters, spanning through time between ancestors and young people, grandmother and granddaughter forms the second layer of vision/findings. The letters contain quotes from participants who wished to be named (Bishop, 2024).

An important research protocol, and matter of cultural safety, was protecting the anonymity of participants who did not wish to be identified (Thunig, 2022). Failure to do so could be detrimental to participants (and our relationship) as their participation in the research was dependent on anonymity. For this reason, I have withheld the total number of participants involved. This act of refusal to disclose information may be viewed as extreme and unnecessary. Indeed, I am unsure if identification could occur by revealing the total number of participants. Yet, as a beginning researcher, I acknowledge my inexperience. I have taken a position to prioritise relationships and feel comfortable with a somewhat extreme, albeit "better safe than sorry", approach.

However, it is important to note that anonymity should not be considered the default position, with Marx and Macleod (2018) arguing that this assumption undermines participants' "self-determination [and] is not only paternalistic, but also reminiscent of colonial rule" (p. 315). Mohawk scholar Dawn Martin-Hill (2008) agrees that anonymity can be perceived as dehumanising for Indigenous participants. In addition, many Indigenous participants want to be named in research in order to have their knowledges attributed and accounted for (Ashdown et al., 2018). This was certainly the case with some of the participants involved in this research; they were insistent on their names being used (see Bishop, 2024). Indeed, the findings of this research have been arranged into two creative outputs that were dependant on whether a participant wanted to be named or not.

For Gomeroi scholar Amy Thunig (2022), "poetic transcription" was used as an amalgamation technique to follow through on promises of anonymity when use of pseudonyms was considered too risky to participant identity. Likewise, Ranjan Datta (2022), an Indigenous scholar from Bangladesh, found pseudonyms would not sufficiently protect elders' and knowledge-keepers' identities in their research and, therefore, chose to amalgamate the data. For me, story is used as an amalgamation practice to re-present findings from anonymous participants. The story that follows contains characters whose details, including names, ages, occupations and profiles, are intentionally jumbled so that there are no recognisable characteristics that could jeopardise anonymity. In addition, quotes are scattered so that one character might say quotes from multiple people, rather than one character being assigned to one participant. Using story in this way functions to protect anonymity yet maintain the active voice of anonymous participants. Through characters and dialogue, participant voices are amplified and brought to life in a way that resonates with the reader (Adams et al., 2015).

Story

> "Storytelling is an act of sovereignty that reinforces Indigenous identity, values and worldview" (Behrendt, 2019, p. 175).

Stories are a deeply intricate part of Indigeneity, with Aboriginal writer Ambelin Kwaymullina (2017) asserting that "Indigenous peoples have always come to know our worlds through story" (p. 43). Stories have carried our law, our knowledges, our futurities for tens of thousands of years, "for story is the most powerful intergenerational manifestation of hope" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 13). Stories are also known to produce oxytocin, which makes this form of knowledge transmission exceptional in ensuring continuous cultures over thousands of generations (Behrendt, 2023). How incredible, right?! It can be seen within Indigenous knowledge systems the world over that stories are widely renowned as "culturally nuanced ways of knowing, produced within networks of relational meaning-making" (Hunt, 2014, p. 27).

I felt immense responsibility to find respectful and impactful ways to re-present the knowledges, stories and vision shared by participants in this research. How could I write up the findings in the same loving way as the project design and "data collection"? As Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim Tallbear (2017) notes: "[It is] helpful to frame the research process as a relationship-building process ... as an opportunity for conversation and sharing of knowledge, not simply data gathering. Research must then be conceived in less linear ways without necessarily knowable goals at the outset" (p. 80). In academia, storying has been a way for me to stay grounded and ensure I am communicating in accessible and enjoyable ways—an effort to bring people in. Many Indigenous scholars have written about the importance of story in research (Barnes, 2024; Behrendt, 2019; Ober, 2017; Phillips & Bunda, 2018; Thunig, 2022).

Non-Indigenous scholar Louise Phillips and Ngugi/Wakka Wakka scholar Tracey Bunda (2018) define storying as the "act of making and remaking meaning through stories" (p. 7). They outline five principles of storying: 1. storying nourishes thought, body and soul; 2. storying claims voice in the silenced margins; 3. storying is embodied relational meaning making; 4. storying intersects the past and present as living oral archives; and 5. storying enacts collective ownership and authorship (p. 43). Phillips and Bunda (2018) insist that research should be accessible to all, spanning culture and class, and argue storying is a way to achieve this. Storying also produces "emergent meaning with data slowly over time through stories" (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 7). Indeed, storying is rigorous and enjoyable; as Phillips and Bunda (2018) argue, "Through storying, we then can develop deeper, more complex understanding of phenomena" (p. 50). Furthermore, Phillips and Bunda (2018) assert that "storying honours the legacy of our ancestors engaging in theorising and research from the emergence of language" (p. 9).

For Mamu-Bagirgabara scholar Robyn Ober (2017), "storytelling is a natural part of life; it is used to inform past histories, kinship structures, beliefs, values, morals, expected behaviour and attitudes" (p. 10). Likewise, Wiradjuri scholar Dylan Barnes (2024) sees storytelling as a way to connect us to our ancestors, stating that "through storytelling, we communicate knowledge that has been taught to us by our ancestors, who learned from their ancestors, who ultimately learned these knowledges through their experiences and engagements with Country and the Dreaming" (p. 198). Similarly, amiskwaciwiyiniwak (Beaver Hills Cree) scholar Dwayne Donald (2021) thinks of story as a "foundational way through which human beings express their understandings of the world and their place in it" (p. 55). Storytelling is also a way of challenging the academy, with Eualeyai/Kamillaroi scholar Larissa Behrendt (2019) arguing that "storytelling not only challenges or decolonizes institutions, it is a way of reasserting Indigenous voice, perspective and experience" (p. 175). In this way, Behrendt (2019) declares, "Indigenous storytelling is the counter-narrative of colonization" (p. 183). Furthermore, Aboriginal scholar Marnee Shay and colleagues (2022) emphasise the importance of presenting research findings in ways that have a "real and tangible impact for participants", arguing the "efficacy of stories is that they provide a way to present research findings that informs and relates to the community" (p. 662).

In this paper, story shifts power regimes to align with Indigenous, decolonising, and relational theories and methodologies in profound ways (Behrendt, 2019). For example, story becomes a way to re-present the findings from anonymous community members by creating a scenario where the characters are elders, community members and young people having a yarn, dialoguing and mimicking intergenerational reciprocity. In some instances, quotes have been modified for readability, however, all efforts were made to retain the original meaning/message. For example, the quote "statistically it is clear colonised curriculum isn't working for our people" was changed to "what we're learning isn't working for us", while the quote "I believe traditional storytelling encourages critical thinking and holistic practice" was changed to "storytelling gets ya to think real hard too about how everything's connected".

Story is a way to apply Indigenous, decolonising and relational theories/methodologies to the dissemination of findings by sharing the results with community (young and old) in an accessible and enjoyable format. Prioritising community readership is a way of encouraging reciprocity in the research process (Shay et al., 2022; L. T. Smith, 2012)—a way of giving back/paying forward both to participants and to the broader community (Menzel & Cameron, 2021). As Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach (2021) writes: "Story nurtures relationship. Story kindles reciprocity. Story compels responsibility. Story thrives where there is respect. Story is a gift. And in research, this changes everything" (p. 156).

It's story time now! Get cosy, grab a cuppa, clear your head. Close your eyes. Feel your ribs rise as you take a big breath. What does the future look like for our young ones? For those in the deep future yet to join us?

"Our Education, Our Way"

The frost escapes from the grass as Kookaburra calls out, letting everyone know it's time. Soon, rubbing eyes and stretching limbs, people emerge into the warmth of sunlight. There's a bustle over breakfast: where's the spoons? pass the milk, has this kettle been boiled long? The kids start playing hide and seek while the adults scoop blueberries into plastic bowls.

"Come over now, you mob, I wanna tell yous a story." Aunty Kyra settles into the camp chair and waves at the young ones. They stop counting, come out of their hiding spots, and all gather round, the littlies and the bigger kids, and their families too.

"I got a story for yous. This is a story about a new way of learning that is based on a very, very old way of learning. So old it goes back all the way to the beginning of time."

"But Aunty, what's wrong with the way we're learning now?" Coen asks.

"Well my baby, schools are one way of learning, but they don't work for everyone. I see so many children struggling in today's education system and it's heartbreaking," says Aunty Kyra.

"True. Every school is different, 'aye, some are doing great and others you wouldn't send your dog to," Yarran calls out, "my school is so awesome but my cousin goes to a school that doesn't even do an Acknowledgement of Country. It's like blakfullas are invisible."

"We want black kids knowing that they're strong black kids. Yeah, we want them literate and numerate, but we don't want that shoved down their throats to the point that, you know, identity and belonging come second," Coen's parent Edie adds.

"Yeah, and teachers are so stressed! It's like our culture is just a tick a box. What we're learning isn't working for us! But they don't listen," cries Balun.

"That's right. I've seen that over the years. And I keep saying to those teachers, those principals, unless fundamentally you change your practice, your ways of leading, learning, doing, knowing, being, you know, nothing's gonna change." Aunty Kyra pauses. "That's why, bubs, we've had very small gains, very sadly, for a very long period of time for our kids, you know, generations and generations of kids that have gone to the wayside and shouldn't of because they're super talented."

"I'm with you, Aunt," says Jake, Balun and Alira's dad, "there's a part of me that's a little bit jaded about how far we've come. It's just, kind of, not enough. It just should be more. We should have gone further

over the decades. That whole dispossession through education, it worked perfectly for many, many, many decades, generations, in fact."

"Yeah," chimes in Finn, another parent, "I think we still kind of operate and think in the confines of a very colonised education system."

"True that. I'm, like, where is our viewpoint from the complete top? Not part-way to the top, but you know, from the complete top?" questions Ty, as they join the group with their bubba.

Aunty Kyra looks around. Nearly all the kids and their families are nodding. She hears one of the parents mutter under their breath, "Racism is still around." Another says, "What we're doing now is not working!"

"You're right, bubs, some schools are doing great but lots of schools don't have no understanding of our mob and they've made a lot of our kids feel like they're not listened to and they don't belong. Some kids get put in the lower (special) classes just because they're Aboriginal and that's not ok!" She pauses. "You know, blakfullas have been doing education here forever. Our Ancestors were the first teachers, professors, scientists, researchers, doctors." Aunty Kyra sees the smiles on everyone's faces now as they nod.

"They was good at storytelling too, 'aye Aunt? Getting the young ones to walk, sit, listen and learn through storytelling," one of the older kids, Alira, suggests.

"That's right, bub, and storytelling gets ya to think real hard too about how everything's connected."

"I reckon, in those traditional ways of teaching, you know, I can imagine you were taught when you were ready to be taught. You had to show that aptitude or a willingness to know, 'aye. Our old ways of learning was to really consolidate something by being good at that first before you learnt that new skill."

"There are so many things that are still used today that we have practiced for tens of thousands of years, you know, like astronomy, medicine, physics, cooking, environmental preservation. These things aren't being taught in schools! People talk down on us and treat us as if we're unintelligent because we're told that European settlers saved us and introduced everything, even though most of those things have done more harm than good. It makes me wild!" Bronte's face is red as they take a big sip of water. Aunty Kyra catches their eye and gives a nod, knowing they've had a rough time since starting high school.

"You're right, our Ancestors made great technological advancements that paved the way for inventions that are considered revolutionary!" yells out Jake.

"Yeah, for sure, good on you all for speaking up," says Aunty. "Our Ancestors knew how to look after Country real good, and Country looked after them. They knew everything about their Country, and connected to Country by lookin', hearin', smellin', tastin' and feelin' on our beautiful land. If we keep doing the same, it would give us all so much knowledge and wisdom."

"I love learning about our culture from our land outside, looking up to the stars and learning about our Dreamtime," says Jara, one of the littlies.

Then one of the old Uncles speaks up, they worked at a local school. Unc says, "In my role as a teacher, learning and teaching on Country is pivotal in engaging students into having a deeper understanding of how Aboriginal people use traditional knowledge to understand concepts in modern times."

You can see everyone getting excited now thinking about Country and the genius of Indigenous knowledges, and the group starts talking all at once. Aunty Kyra can barely keep track of who was talking.

“I learn from Country by being immersed in the outdoors. Stepping outside of a classroom and actually seeing life from a different perspective,” calls Alira.

“We have a unique connection to the land and everything that surrounds us,” cries Yarran.

“Country teaches resourcefulness, being grateful for the land we occupy and not taking it for granted,” shouts Balun.

The families are joining in too. Finn exclaims, “It’s about a complete way of being and connecting. It is the place that grounds me most and the place I seek when seas are rough.”

“Absolutely! Yous are making me excited! It’s great to see how connected yous all are. Country is so important to how we learn. Country is our teacher too.” Aunty Kyra looks closely at everyone. “So whaddya reckon you mob, should education be done differently here, designed by Aboriginal people?”

“Yes!” “Yeah!” “For sure!” “That’d be amazing!” The kids are jumping up and down, faces beaming. The smiles spread across the families’ faces too. “Yes! I think this should be a really big push as having young people grounded in Aboriginal knowledges will strengthen and empower all Indigenous students.”

Nan Dot adds, “The thought of my children and grandchildren learning more about their culture in a more comfortable learning environment makes me feel excited.”

“It needs to be in our hands! Aboriginal controlled, Aboriginal directed,” one young mum shouts.

“Yeah. Our own schools, that would be the key. It’d be a great starting place.”

“In a Blak school, built on Blak vision, you wouldn’t see the bureaucracy like performance data and those kinds of things being important. And that’s what will differ, it’s not to say that we don’t want kids to be literate and numerate. Like Edie said, we do, but not at the risk of losing their sense of identity.” Lots of the families nod in support as Ty speaks up, “Our kids’ futures are too important!”

“It’d be pretty mad, ‘aye, if we got to do our education, our way! You know, over the years I’ve seen what culture and community and belonging can do to education and I support it and will advocate for it wherever I can. Coz I want happy, healthy children who are confident in culture, community and belonging. I want all of yous to be able to follow ya dreams and know how to look after yourselves proper, to fill your cups up. I want all you young ones to know who you are. None of this hiding away, you be strong and proud!” Aunty Kyra nods and beats her fist into the arm of the camp chair. She’s all fired up now. “That’s what I wanna see, and there’s been other Elders in community dreaming of this for a long time. But what about yous? What does our education, our way look and feel like for your great-great grannies in the future?”

Some of the kids giggle.

“To be happy while learning,” says Jara.

“Definitely some more on Country lessons from local Elders or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,” replies Coen.

“Ohhh Aunt, wouldn’t it be amazing one day to have English as the second language in a metro school?” gushed Alira.

“What about an open school where everyone can come, learning languages, sitting round the fire with the smoke and the leaves. Where people are on the same level as everyone else, coz right now, we aren’t seen on the same level,” adds Bronte.

“Yeah Bronte, I like that, where we can learn as equals being respected and taught, not talked at,” Balun agrees.

Uncle speaks up again, “Imagine how different it’d be if we gave people the knowledge they need when they need it? You know, rather than a pre-determined set of, you know, content, values, outcomes, before even knowing the learner, like they do in school. Where’s the innovation in that, do ya know what I mean?”

There are lots of nods in agreement. Edie says, “What I wanna see, Aunt, is confident young blakfullas, confident parents engaged in schooling and contributing as a community to events and activities. Everyone would be heard and it would be humbling to be a part of. I dream that is a possibility someday.”

“Ah that’s a lovely vision, Edie, I wanna be part of that too.”

“I’d love a place of learning that engages us and gives us a sense of belonging, you know, makes it feel like a home. That’s a place where we know we’re gonna come each and every day and be celebrated but also be valued,” adds Yarran.

Alira jumps in, “Yeah, where we have people in the community teaching us, people who know what we need and are of community background. It’s all about the relationships, ‘aye.”

“I love this, you mob! We need kids who question what’s happening in their world and in the broader world around them. Kids who are curious, who investigate, who research, who do all these things in the skills of what a 21st century learner does, but they do it with a strong, strong base of who they are. I feel real proud listening to yous.” Finn smiles warmly at the young ones.

“True! I want kids to be learning from Aboriginal Elders coz Aboriginal culture will help people be strong in culture. They’ll have respect that the Country we live in always was, always will be …”

“Aboriginal land!!” the kids finish the chant and everyone laughs.

“For sure, and imagine if non-Aboriginal children and communities are picking that up and wanting it for their children as well, you know. That’s a reconciled Australia,” says Uncle.

There’s a collective “yeeeewwww” from kids and families. The air buzzes with excitement. Overhead the sun is glaring and starting to heat up. A few jumpers have already been tossed on the ground. Louder and louder the magpies warble, echoing across the canopy. Country is alive.

“I want the future generations to feel a sense of belonging and pride in their culture and know their identity so they feel empowered and willing to learn. This is to strengthen our culture and never have it lost over the generations to come.” Aunty Kyra stretches her arms. Her eyes are bright. She looks up, sees that big hawk gliding above the trees and nods to herself; Country is giving her a sign. “Now you mob know that the best learning has gotta come from a cultural perspective first. We’ll keep talking about that a bit later, c’mon, let’s go have a cuppa and a run around first.”

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