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# Education is the key

**T**O put an end to the ongoing national disgrace that is Aboriginal deaths in custody, and to prevent the destruction of ancient sites of world significance, Australians must value and understand our true history and the incredible, unique culture to which we are all heirs.

There is one sure way to do this – through education.

Every school in Australia needs to employ a local Indigenous cultural educator. With traditional knowledges and practices embedded in schools as an educational standard, we could transform our understanding of our land, our cultural heritage, end systemic and societal racism.

And we must do this now.

Recent news reports such as Rio Tinto's destruction of a significant sacred site of the Puutu Kuntj Kurrama and Pinikura people in the Pilbara region, and prominent Australians denying the use of slave labour in the past has coincided with tens of thousands of First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians protesting Indigenous deaths in custody and police brutality.

If anything speaks to the systemic racism that we all live in, it's the irony of police guarding



**Anne Pattel-Gray**

statues of questionable colonial figures and Netflix removing offensive content, when First Nations people are dying in cells, and it's legal for mining giants to destroy irreplaceable 46,000-year-old sites comparable to the Roman ruins the world also treasures.

This is why recent comments on Australians needing to know our own history from Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan were so welcome.

We need a deeper commitment at all levels of government to First Nations perspectives across the school curriculum. The protests are highlighting the urgency of

systemic change to deliver justice.

These changes should include an education system that provides a culturally safe place for all First Nations children to learn and grow and meaningful teaching of Indigenous history and culture.

Around 100,000 people attended these rallies, and a recent poll by Essential found that while most respondents didn't attend due to COVID-19 risks, 62% believed the protests were justified, while a recent Change.Org petition on a First Nations subject being compulsory in schools is approaching 150,000 signatures.

Australia is speaking. Racism must be addressed.

If you're not sure racism exists, consider this: The Australian National University survey found that around 75% of people polled held an unconscious bias which can lead to racial discrimination, and that the discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was not imagined.

The evidence, frameworks and public will are clear: It's now time to act.

Placing a local Indigenous cultural educator in every Australian school would instill in

future generations the truth about First Nations people – our achievements, and the resilience of a culture that's survived more than 200 years of colonisation. This is not about attacking teachers, but rather providing better support for teachers and students alike.

World Vision is also calling for cultural immersion programs that go beyond the classroom, with students taken on excursions by First Nations people to experience our living, breathing history.

This will create a future where First Nations values and ways of being are grounded in a stronger and inclusive Australian society.

This position is consistent at an international level with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples where signatories have a responsibility to deliver culturally relevant education for Indigenous children.

A local Indigenous cultural educator would:

- provide cultural awareness education in the classroom, including sharing First Nations history, language and stories;
- coordinate on country learning experiences for students, teachers and school staff;
- provide cultural awareness

training for teachers and school staff; and

- support cross-curriculum embedding of First Nations knowledges, such as teaching science, geography and mathematics through First Nations practices and approaches.

There are around 7000 public schools across Australia, and several have Aboriginal education assistants, particularly where there are high Indigenous student numbers.

However, these are primarily focused on education support, pastoral care and to enable engagement for First Nations students across Australia.

With dedicated cultural educators, we have a real opportunity to transform Australia into a country that treasures its unique First Nations heritage alongside the other traditions that form our complex and amazing society. We can eradicate injustice and suffering.

Fair, inclusive, generous and culturally enriched – this is the Australia that together we can work towards.

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