



Ms. Sharon Foster
Executive Director, Curriculum
Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
Via email: engagement@acara.edu.au

Dear Ms Foster,

Re: The Australian Curriculum – Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Revival Languages (Years F-10)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the above-mentioned Framework (“**the Framework**”).

The Aboriginal Languages Trust (“**ALT**”) is an Aboriginal-led New South Wales (“**NSW**”) Government agency established under the [Aboriginal Languages Act 2017](#) (“**the Act**”) to provide a focused, coordinated, and sustained effort in relation to Aboriginal Languages activities at local, regional and State levels.

The functions of the ALT are defined in the Act. They include:

- promoting Language activity
- identifying priorities for Language activity
- managing the funding of, and investment in Language activity
- promoting education and employment opportunities in Language activities
- promoting the wider use and appreciation of Aboriginal Languages

The ALT is also the lead NSW State Government agency for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Target 16: By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages being spoken.

In 2022, the ALT launched its inaugural five-year [Strategic Plan](#), which was developed following consultation with around 400 stakeholders, 81% of which identified as Aboriginal. The Strategic Plan outlines the ALT’s vision and purpose:

All NSW Aboriginal Languages are strong and healthy.

We aid in the growth and nurturing of NSW Aboriginal Languages by responding to the aspirations of Communities and participating in their self-determining work to reclaim and reawaken their Languages.

Consultation on our Strategic Plan also heard views from NSW Aboriginal Communities on the teaching of Aboriginal Languages in schools. The below feedback and recommendations are based on these views and subsequent feedback from NSW Aboriginal Communities.

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AIMS OF THE CURRICULUM

The Framework currently (p. 5) states:

The 3 interrelated aims of Languages are to develop knowledge, understanding and skills to ensure students:

- *develop linguistic competence*
- *understand language and culture, and their relationship, and thereby develop an intercultural capability in communication*
- *understand themselves as communicators.*

For Aboriginal people in NSW, and many other parts of Australia, Language is sacred and connects people with their identity, place, kin, Country and Culture. Language is used by Aboriginal Community members to honour those who have come before them and provides important life lessons for children and young people. Therefore, for Aboriginal students, the purpose and aim of learning Languages goes beyond the current reasons listed in the Framework.

In NSW, all Aboriginal Languages are in various stages of revitalisation, and most students engaged in Language learning are doing so as either Second-language learners or Background-language learners. The aims of Language teaching and learning for Aboriginal Communities can include:

- To connect with identity, Culture and Country
- To reclaim Language and Culture, and ensure they are kept alive
- To empower and strengthen Communities
- To foster a sense of belonging and pride

The current Framework aims should be reworked to acknowledge the significance of learning Language for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, noting that these aims will differ from those for non-Aboriginal students.

Recommendations

1. Update the Aims of the Curriculum to include specific aims for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

STRUCTURE

The current structure outlined in the Framework has two strands – Communicating meaning in Language, which is mostly about using and producing Language, and Understanding Language and Culture, which is about the linguistic features of Language and the role of Language and Culture in identity.

A key element of learning about Aboriginal Languages undergoing revival, which is not adequately covered in the current Framework, is understanding the historical context and actions of governments that caused damage to Languages and the current context in which revival is being undertaken. At age-appropriate levels, this must include information about past events and government policies which impacted people's ability to teach and learn their Languages. This would include information about the

Frontier Wars, displacement of Aboriginal people from their lands, Stolen Generations and government policies that impacted Aboriginal people’s ability to connect to their lands, families and Communities through Language.

The Framework should also include information about the significant work being undertaken by Aboriginal Communities to revive their Languages and an appreciation for the immense effort it takes to bring a Language back into use. In NSW alone, there are hundreds of people working towards the revival of their Languages and Language revival activities happening in every region. This work needs to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Recommendations

2. That the structural strands of the Framework be expanded to include understanding the historical contexts that contributed to the silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages and the current work being undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities to revitalise those Languages.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

While the Framework currently includes information about meeting the needs of diverse learners, it fails to acknowledge the specific needs of Aboriginal students when learning about their Languages.

The process of reviving a Language can be an emotional journey as the loss of Language carries with it the memory of severe trauma. Many Aboriginal people in NSW, including young children, are aware of family members who were punished for speaking their Language or have been impacted by the loss of their Language. At the same time, Language has the potential to be healing – another reason why Aboriginal Communities are working so hard to bring their Languages back into use today.

Teaching staff need to be aware of the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and how they may be impacted by Language learning. Care needs to be taken during teaching, providing information about the damage done to Languages and moderating classroom discussions about Languages to protect the Cultural Safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Importantly, learning an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Language cannot be tokenistic – the way it is presented in the classroom must be cognisant of the sacredness and importance of Language to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students present in Language classes.

Recommendations

3. Key Considerations should be updated to include considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait student wellbeing as part of Language learning.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND PROTOCOLS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGES CURRICULA AND PROGRAMS

The current Framework states that “appropriate consultations with language Custodians are central to the development of language-specific curricula and the provision of language learning programs in schools” (p. 21). This cannot be emphasised enough as each Language and its Community has specific

protocols and preferences when it comes to Language learning. Language curricula should never be developed without proper engagement with local Language Custodians.

In NSW, Community opinions vary about whether Languages should be taught in schools, TAFEs and universities. According to feedback from Aboriginal Communities across NSW, some encourage Language teaching in schools, while others are concerned that when Languages are taught in schools, Communities no longer have ownership or control of their Languages.

Community ownership of the curriculum, rather than school ownership, is required to ensure Aboriginal Cultural and Intellectual Property is retained by Communities. Schools can then engage Community Language groups to teach, as is the model used in some parts of NSW. Given the Language expertise and time required to develop Language resources and for Community members to teach, schools should have budget allocated and processes in place for employing Aboriginal Language teachers and to remunerate them for the development and use of Language teaching resources.

Who can teach Language is another topic that must be decided by Language Custodians. NSW Language Communities have consistently raised concerns about people teaching Language without Language Custodian consent. Teacher protocols must be determined and endorsed by the Community of that Language to maintain the integrity of Language teaching.

Recommendations

4. The Framework should emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages curricula should never be developed without proper engagement with local Language Custodians. This includes who is endorsed by each Community to teach Language.
5. Protocols need to include the allocation of budget to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language teachers and the development and use of Language teaching resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. Please reach out for further information.

Best Regards,

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Aboriginal Languages Trust
Date: 7th November 2023