

**SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CONSULTATION  
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*For students in our state schools and teachers as well, [teaching human rights] may serve to show that privilege is an anachronism, the dogma is a distraction, freedom is a birthright and discrimination wrong,.... To the advantages of state education -- secularity, diversity and locality -- let us now add humanity.*  
(Geoffrey Robertson, 2006)

**Introduction:**

The Australian nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a microcosm of the world with over 200 languages spoken in its vast landscape. Yet Australia is a land of paradoxes. It lays claim to having one of the most successful transitions to a multicultural nation on the planet, yet its racist tendencies are clearly identifiable to those who choose to peel away the rhetoric. Australia's race relations history, firstly with its Indigenous peoples and later with non Anglo-Celtic immigrants, is underpinned by racism and discrimination.

The current debates over the Federal Governments handling of 'the Intervention' into Indigenous issues in the Northern Territory; the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers; the increased racism towards Muslims in our community; the hothouse events of the Cronulla beach riots in December 2005; the community reaction to the plan to build a Muslim school south west of Sydney, as well as the debate over the implementation of the citizenship and values test for migrants in 2007, have been used by activists and academics alike as indicators of higher levels of disquiet and intolerance in Australia.

This view is contested by leading politicians who are adamant that Australians aren't

overtly racist. According to these politicians the Cronulla beach riots were not about race and ethnicity, but rather about rival youth gangs. Despite condemning the violence that took place at Cronulla, the then Prime Minister, John Howard insisted *I do not accept there is underlying racism in this country, I have always taken a more optimistic view of the character of the Australian people.* (Murphy & Davies 2005). They maintain that Australia still has one of the most tolerant racially diverse societies on the planet. Indeed, some reports find that migrants see Australia as a very tolerant country compared to their country of origin (Ang et al, 2002, p. 23). On the other hand, critics suggest that in defining Australia's evolution to a multicultural nation simply in terms of social cohesion and building a unified nation fails to address the very real issues of discrimination and racism that exist in Australia. (Babacan 2006 p. 54). Critics also note that Australia is one of the few social democracies in the developed world that does not have a *Charter or Bill of Rights* embedded within its legal or constitutional frameworks. This they believe, creates the potential for discrimination and human rights violations at many levels.

### **Challenges:**

- Within these contexts how do civic leaders and policy makers work with communities to build civil societies based on principles of social justice, human rights and social inclusion?
- What should be the role of education, and schools in particular, in converting the challenges of our increasingly diverse societies in a globalised world into opportunities for children and young people to better understand our common humanity?
- What curriculum reforms are needed to ensure that school implement programs that incorporate human rights education?

My presentation at the 6<sup>th</sup> *International Human Rights Forum* in Lucerne in May 2009 explored some of these important questions with references to the Australia's race relations history and research in the area of schools and diversity. It also referred to *The National Human Rights Consultation* initiated by the Federal Government on the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and what educational institutions should do to improve human rights education. Some of its main points are noted below together with several key recommendations that focus on the need for

curriculum reform through a greater emphasis on human rights education in the curriculum including at the national curriculum level and the provisions of better resources for teachers (including technology and professional training) to implement these reforms in schools.

### **Background:**

#### **i) Indigenous and non Indigenous race relations and Human Rights Education**

Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia since 1788 have been characterised by a history of omission and neglect that lasted until the 1970s and a more recent history of social and economic disadvantage.

Historians such as Henry Reynolds have noted the total neglect of Aboriginal peoples as a characteristic of Australian Historical Scholarship in the 20th Century (Reynolds, 1984). Indeed Aboriginal peoples are not mentioned in the constitution; they were not counted in official census figures as citizens until 1967; they did not gain many of the social welfare benefits until 1967 because of their lack of status - even though many fought in wars and contributed to the building of the Australian nation as farm workers. Under the policies of *Protection* and later *Assimilation* that prevailed throughout Australia from the 1880s until the 1960s, Aboriginal children could be removed from their families and placed in institutions. Known as the Stolen Generations their stories have been detailed in one of Australia's most significant national reports. The *Bringing them Home Report*, released in 1997 was met with great contestation by conservative forces but finally formed the basis of the *National Apology* to Indigenous Australians over a decade later in February 2008 by the new Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd.

Of equal significance was the discrimination Aboriginal peoples faced in our education systems, again until the 1960s, that relegated them to inferior schooling in segregated classrooms and a debased curriculum that trained them to be workers rather than professionals. The legacy of these policies is still evident in national statistics on socio-economic levels and in international testing results that depict Indigenous children as still lagging behind their non- Indigenous counterparts in literacy and numeracy as noted by this report:

While 77% of Indigenous students met the minimum benchmark for reading in 2000, this compares unfavourably with the 93% of non-Indigenous

students who achieve the benchmark. With regard to numeracy, 74% of Indigenous children met the benchmark in 2000, whereas 93% of non-Indigenous students met this same standard. Of greater concern is the increase in the gap which grows to 25% in reading and 27% in numeracy by Year 5 (Mellor and Corrigan, 2004).

It is not within the scope of this submission to discuss in detail the complexities of the race relations debates that underscore Indigenous and non Indigenous relations. However, it is abundantly clear that any discussion about Human Rights education must encompass this aspect of our history from the earliest colonial period to the 1967 referendum that gave Indigenous Australians status as peoples in the Australian nation, to the High Courts decision on Native Title in 1992 that recognised that Australia was not ‘terra nullius’ - a land belonging to no-one. Despite the Reconciliation movement and the National Apology, the need to address the issues of Indigenous economic and social disadvantage and Indigenous rights still remain the ‘unfinished business’ of the Australian nation. Any new curriculum with a human rights focus must emphasise the

## **ii) Australia as a nation of immigrants**

Discrimination can have a pervasive influence. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission concluded in 2001 that decades after its abolition, the impact of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 (White Australia Policy), amended in 1958 and finally abolished in 1973, is still felt in Australian society in its exclusive construction of Australian identity, leading to ... to popular ideas of the need for people to conform to a set of perceived cultural and social norms if they are to be truly ‘Australian.’ (HREOC, 1991; Forrest & Dunn, 2007 pp 704-5).

The evolution of Australia’s immigration policy from those restrictive practices to the modern cosmopolitan representation of a global community is predominantly the result of the policy of Multiculturalism. Introduced in the early 1970s by the Whitlam Labor government, the policy retained bi- partisan support until the mid 1990s when the onset of conservative politics from 1996 – 2007 and the impact of the fears of global terrorism, lead to increased racial tensions and a change in the support for Multiculturalism in policy documents. However, multiculturalism is now a

feature of the Australian identity with 43% of Australians either born overseas or having a parent who was born overseas. The impact of our multicultural communities is most evident in our classrooms.

### **Schools, cultural diversity and human rights**

Schools are not immune from the changing attitudes to diversity in the community. Research conducted after the events of September 11, 2001 noted an increase in racist tension (Dunn and Forest, 2007; Dreher, 2006; Mansouri and Trembath, 2005; Browning & Jakubowicz, 2004), while research into schools and cultural diversity (Burridge and Chodkiewicz, 2008) indicates that school activities were often shaped by the nature of a school and its community and the response of the school's leadership team. According to the research, as cultural diversity varied across Sydney, so did the ways schools responded to that diversity. Schools in less culturally diverse communities did not see the need for a great emphasis on activities promoting cultural diversity.

Just as importantly, a perusal of the curriculum in New South Wales schools found limited references to human rights in its subjects. Only the junior secondary Geography syllabus and the Aboriginal studies syllabus actually refer to the issue of human rights within their framework. There is no reference to history of the United Nations or human rights in the History syllabus – nor does the term appear in the English syllabus.

Senior secondary syllabus documents suffer a similar fate. There is no detailed reference to the United Nations and its charters in the Modern History syllabus and few references in the humanities subjects except perhaps in the Legal Studies syllabus.

In the Primary school years the focus is on values education through the *Respect and Responsibility* policy document launched in 2006. While teachers may structure the curriculum around a teaching unit on human rights, there is little formal resource support for this from educational bodies. The Australian Human Rights Commission

does provide a broad range of web based resources for teachers and students as does Amnesty International, but again there is no clear evidence that these are accessed on a regular basis. Overall, Australia seems to be lagging behind the rest of the western world in its pursuit of human rights education.

In contrast, the European Union is engaging in robust discussions about education for democratic citizenship (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2008; Council of Europe 2008; International Human Rights Forum, Lucerne, 2009) and has developed new initiatives to support it.

It must be emphasized that within the context of modern Australian neighbourhoods, where families now rely on schools to play a significant part in the socialisation of their children, all schools have an important role to play in nurturing communities that are socially inclusive. Schools are in a position to build bridges between different cultural perspectives. This can be done in an atmosphere of shared learning, within the safety of the school grounds in the first instance, but also through reaching out to the wider community, through parent groups, community associations and the local council. In this way the key stakeholders in a local area can work to create neighbourhoods that are truly inclusive in that they value all the different cultural traditions that exist in their communities.

## **Recommendations:**

### **1. Curriculum Reform**

This submission notes that schools are ideally situated to teach about the history of human rights; to explore what constitutes human rights for the ordinary citizens and to discuss human rights violations both in a historical context and in the current context, nationally and internationally. It therefore commends that curriculum reform is needed to embed human rights education in key learning areas in school syllabus documents throughout Australia.

### **2. Resources: professional training and technology**

that governments provide schools with the resources and technology required to make global education a reality so that all children and young people are exposed to the myriad of cultures that make the global village. In today's classrooms technology enables teachers and students to connect with communities throughout the world through the use of 'smartboards', 'Google Earth' and the latest Web 2 technology. Schools should be well equipped and teachers well trained to access these resources so that students from a very young age are aware that we really do live in societies that are interconnected in a myriad of ways.

### **3. Teaching Ethics in primary and secondary schools**

It further recommends that there should be a greater focus in the primary and secondary curriculum on ethics and ethical behaviour. As a teacher of some 30 years experience I firmly believe that it is possible to discuss with primary as well as secondary students what constitutes ethical behaviour in a given scenario. This aspect of a child's education should not be relegated to the one hour religion class – that students may or may not attend – but should be integrated into the standard curriculum as well as practiced on daily basis in general classroom interactions.

### **4. National Curriculum and human rights education**

The creation of the National Curriculum Board and the deliberations on what should be part of the national curriculum provides us with a timely opportunity to expand our curriculum documents to embed human rights education perspectives in key subjects and provide schools with a framework which focuses on active participation of students and teachers in teaching about individual and collective rights and respect for others in our society.

### **5. Schools as Learning communities**

Strategies for human rights education should include closer collaborations between schools and civic bodies as learning communities. Schools should connect with elders in the community as well as local businesses and other government agencies to provide a more holistic education. For example, bringing elders into schools as mentors for children and young people who do not have extended family connections often provides opportunities for very positive interactions for both groups.

In these ways schools can promote universal values, intercultural dialogue and democratic citizenship and engender processes where peoples live safely and with dignity in their communities.

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I will post a hard copy of this submission together with the program for the 6<sup>th</sup> International Human Rights Forum at the University of Central Switzerland, May 2009.