

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

Bendigo – Tuesday 16 April 2024

MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Moira Deeming

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Dozer Atkinson, Senior Cultural Advisor, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation.

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for joining us. I will quickly introduce you to the panel. I have got my Deputy Chair Mr Ryan Batchelor, Ms Rachel Payne, Ms Melina Bath, Ms Moira Deeming, Mr Aiv Puglielli and Dr Heath on my left. We have also got, on Zoom, Mr Joe McCracken.

Before I continue, though, I will just quickly read this information to you as a priority. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore any information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will also be made available to the public and posted on our committee website.

Before we do continue and you show the video, could you quickly say your name and introduce the organisation you are representing.

Dozer ATKINSON: Okay, yes. I will start off with my name. My name is Darren Atkinson, but I am better known as my nickname Dozer, and there is a long story behind that. I am here representing Mungab, Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation, which is an ACCO. But I also wear a separate hat, which is Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Education, which is our family consultancy. I love to yarn, but at Mungab I am the Senior Cultural Advisor, and my role with Mungab is to oversee the cultural support plans for young children that have been placed in out-of-home care. With my consultancy, by creating that opportunity, it has allowed me to get into organisations and schools and all facets of community to share culture and break down the misunderstandings on the road to reconciliation.

The CHAIR: Thank you. If you like, we can show the video, and after that we will just have a few questions, if that is possible.

Dozer ATKINSON: Yes, that is fine.

The CHAIR: You wanted to show some video, I understand.

Dozer ATKINSON: Yes, I do. I am not 100 per cent with technology, so I am hoping that I am able to do this successfully. Before I play the video, I just want to say that this approach to the state schools that we are taking, as traditional owners of our country, in sharing our culture has had a lot of great outcomes. We have been sharing culture not only with the Koori kids that are in the education system but also with the non-Indigenous kids, and they are really taking pride in learning our culture, learning our language and learning our ways of learning. We are lucky to have elders still in our community to bring that old Aboriginal way of learning, and that has been really adaptive to the children in the state school setting. Just for example, rather than counting numbers one, two, three, we are counting animal footprints. We are identifying animals and we are connecting kids to country, and it has a bigger and more accepting approach from that primary school age group. You know, even the secondary schools that we are going into have the same acceptance of that old way of learning. Please forgive me, I think if I share my screen –

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will wait for it.

Dozer ATKINSON: Has it come up?

The CHAIR: Not yet. If you like, speak about it, and we can watch it later.

Dozer ATKINSON: Yes. Look, the video – we have been having this approach with five schools now in the north-east and it really bounces off the back of language, the language that belongs to this country. We are sharing that language with the children in the state schools, or the schools, I must say, not only in the primary schools but also in the secondary schools. Look, I think it is a long time coming. We know that we have never

had the opportunity in the past as Aboriginal people to really enter into the education system and the way education is delivered to all Aussie kids. I think it is a great opportunity to incorporate culture into today's education and the way it is delivered.

My yarn is long and wide here, but we are constantly delivering cultural awareness training to all sections of the community and all different organisations. I am taken aback by the comments that we are constantly hearing about how the participants have never heard that coming through their education or coming through their school. When I use the word 'that' I mean some of the cultural connections to country, some of the atrocities that happened, some of the people that have led and trailblazed our way as Aboriginal people for equality, for instance – they are all Aussies. As Aussies, every single person in this state should know, and I am only using Sir Doug Nicholls as an example, what his life was about, what his education was about – what his journey was about. This is a man that has an AFL round named after him. But if you ask a question of any children or anybody on the street, they have not got a clue who you are talking about. That is just an example of how the education department in Victoria has to change to incorporate Aboriginal history.

We are moving forward in this state with treaty. We now have the treaty conversations happening, the truth-telling processes. These stories that are gathered and collected during these processes must be able to be filtered into our education system. Our children have the birthright as Victorian children to know the stories of every single one of the 38 Aboriginal groups in this state and the way we went about educating our children in traditional days, during the mission days, during the days of displacement, during the days of land loss and of culture loss. All these stories still exist in our communities, in the black communities, and they should be compiled and shared with the Aussie children of our state, because what we want to see achieved is a state that is really bound to equality, and we do not have that in this state yet. We are moving in that direction, but it is only the youth that will create that change. I think the youth need to be privy to the tools or to the information to be able to create a true reconciliation between blackfellas and whitefellas in this state. That is what we fight for, that is what we talk for, from an Aboriginal's perspective, when we are talking about equality. We want to share all our stories and share all of our educational approaches to caring for country and caring for community and caring for families.

I will lean back on the reason why we share language. It is because it belongs to the countries that we come from, where the schools sit, where the systems are. The language belongs to where every state school sits, so the state schools have an obligation, which drags along the system, to learn about what the language means and where it is placed and where it belongs. As I said, every single child in our state has a birthright to be part of the oldest living culture on this planet. And through our state schools, through our young youth, that is the opportunity that they are missing out on – showing pride and being proud of being part of the oldest living culture on this planet. What we can do is just keep sharing and keep forging forward until we find common ground with each other and find true reconciliation.

What we do know right now is that we as Aboriginal people want nothing more than for your grandkids' grandkids' grandkids and our grandkids' grandkids' grandkids to be able to walk side by side with each other and not be ridiculed, if you like, for the colour of their skin or how they look. I think the education department plays a big role in achieving real reconciliation, and I think incorporating and introducing the Aboriginal way of learning into our curriculums and into our systems today is definitely going to promote that change.

Just from a ground observation, the children love that outdoor way of learning when they have the opportunity to go outdoors and learn about country, learn about birds and learn about trees. It is not only a great opportunity to share what is required as an education requirement but it is also a great opportunity for them to have respect for their country, because every single kid owns this country now. They have ownership of this country, so they must be able to feel that that is very much part of their life. Things are changing and things are moving forward, but the change has to come.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Darren. We might throw some questions to you now, if that is possible.

Dozer ATKINSON: Yes, please, by all means.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you so much for your insight in relation to how tremendously important it is to connect to First Nations and share their language. I want to ask you, Darren, with your extensive experience

in helping children in and out of care with Indigenous culture and education, what is the best approach regarding educational support for Indigenous and disadvantaged students?

Dozer ATKINSON: I always go back to my days growing up on the mission. For Aboriginal children the transgenerational trauma has very much become a part of how we raise our children, and that has got to be understood. For Aboriginal children's retention in the system we must be able to incorporate what remaining knowledge holders and elders we have in our communities. We must be able to create safe spaces within the school systems where our elders can come in and be very much part of their learning journey. And the thing is that journey must not cease. It must not stop. It must travel right through their primary school and right into their high school. I am a father of four daughters, and I am very, very lucky that they all have completed higher education. I am very, very lucky, because not many of us elders have that opportunity to be able to say that. The school retention for our black kids staying in school is not set up. It is that old square-box mentality. Black kids do not fit into a square box – never did, never will – and I will say that honestly.

If we want to see our retention rate rise in education, we need to be able to change the way it is delivered to Aboriginal kids – simple as that – otherwise we are always going to be dragging the chain. That gap is always going to exist unless good people like yourselves and like the elders that we still have remaining in our community can come together and write up curriculums that suit the needs of Aboriginal children. Just for instance, we see our Aboriginal kindergartens that are springing up all around our state. Their retention rates are 95 per cent. They get black kids every single day coming and learning the first footsteps. But as soon as we hit primary school we start dropping out, and by the time we get to year 7 and year 9 our kids are on the street. The system is not set up to support black children on the journey towards successful education. Now, that has got to change.

Growing up on the mission we always had our knowledge holders and our teachers that played a role in teaching our children. I think that still is done at home. That is still done in the Aboriginal community setting. But once our children leave that community setting and go into society, with the state school being one of the first steps of society, that is fractured. It is lost. So we start losing our children to education. My call is to change systems to better suit the elders in the community so that they have the opportunity to also be the teachers.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Darren. Just before I pass on to the panel, you mentioned that you have four daughters and that they all went on to higher education. Did your influence at home, assistance or support have a lot to do with that at all?

Dozer ATKINSON: Yes, it did. Once again I am going to use the words 'very lucky'. We were very lucky to be stable. We were both employed. We have been employed all our lives, so we had the money and the finances to support our kids through their schooling. A lot of our mob do not. But also our children are very lucky that their grandmother, who is Esme Bamblett – Dr Esme Bamblett, I must add – was one of the first Aboriginal children in our state to complete year 12. We were lucky enough that she became a very staunch sounding board for our daughters, but a lot of our family members do not have that backing from educated teachers within their family groups.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Darren. Thank you for that. I will pass on to the panel now. Deputy Chair.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Mr Atkinson, thanks so much for the contribution you have made today. You talked at the start about the importance of the truth-telling that we are seeing here in Victoria, both for the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal community. I think it is critical to our path forward that stories and truth are told about our shared past. One of the things you mentioned was that you think these stories need to be filtered through our education system. I am wondering, given the work you have done in cultural awareness, cultural heritage and programs in schools in particular, what barriers you have experienced, either at a systemic or school level, that have hindered the rollout or the performance of your programs, because that will help us as a committee to think about what recommendations we could make to see more of this type of learning happening in schools across the state. What barriers have you encountered in the education system or in schools to providing the kind of cultural education you are trying to provide?

Dozer ATKINSON: Look, the biggest barrier that we have faced is the teachers and the principals not being culturally aware. I am using the word 'lucky' a lot here, and there has been a lot of luck, but we were lucky

enough that the teachers and the headmasters, the principals, sat with us to do cultural awareness training before we actually had the opportunity to engage with the children. That was a great advantage for us, but that is an obstacle. You know, that is an obstacle because, let us face it, I know that principals are busy. Principals have got a big load on their shoulders, as well as teachers, but they do not have a full understanding of cultural awareness or of what it means to create a culturally safe space for an Aboriginal child. You know, the flags flying at the front just to not cut it no more. Do you know what I mean? That is one of thousands of steps. We see the state schools flying the flag at the front now. That is one of many. We see the acknowledgement plaques at the doors or at the gates or whatever it may be, but that is not enough. I know I am probably stepping out of bounds, but that is not enough.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Keep going.

Dozer ATKINSON: The teachers and the principals and right down to the cleaners need the opportunity given to them to be involved in cultural awareness training, because that is where it all starts. That is the understanding of culture, of why our black kids are the way they are and of why they do what they do. Do you know what I mean? And it is back to that – we, as black kids, do not fit into that square box scenario. Do you know what I mean? That is not our way of teaching our children. So that is probably one of the biggest obstacles. I hope I answered the question.

Ryan BATCHELOR: That was great. It was very helpful. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your contribution today. To follow on, given what you were describing in your contribution about the great outcomes you have seen in sharing language and sharing culture, what do you think would be possible if we saw a program like that expanded to a statewide context – that sharing of First Nations language and culture with all students?

Dozer ATKINSON: The number one advantage I see is that we will end up with more children completing year 12, completing high school, but it has got to start at primary school or it has got to be incorporated into high school so our children feel culturally safe to stay and learn, to get the education. I always refer back to a great one-liner that my brother Archie Roach would always say: 'It's easy for a black kid to act white and feel black.' Do you know what I mean? But the true context of that is that children want to act black and feel black. I just want to sort of make that clear before I finish. That one-liner he would always say to me had a big impact on me because that is how our children feel. Our children have to go into these settings, into settings that are not culturally safe, and are expected to meet the curriculum requirements. That has to change. The retention rates say that. The retention rates are screaming that. We are not keeping enough children culturally safe within their education journey so they are able to stay in the system.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Further to that, to expand this work, to expand a program or programs like those you are describing, do you think we have a sufficient number of teachers who are able to teach Indigenous language and Indigenous culture, First Nations culture, across the state? And if not, what do you think needs to happen?

Dozer ATKINSON: What we are doing at Yarrunga and at Rutherglen and Chiltern – just a few of the towns in the north-east where we are working with these schools – and Carragarmungee, is we are spending time with these teachers and teaching them. We have our language already that is documented, so we are teaching the teachers what the languages mean and the words. And we only give them 50 words. We are limiting the words. We are not throwing a thousand words at these children and expecting them to understand or to speak it fluently. We are throwing the words that are meaningful to them, like 'welcome', 'hello', 'arm', 'leg', 'head', 'tree' – all words that these children can adapt to, but we are teaching the teachers first, and the teachers are teaching this language, so it is not only alongside an elder that sits beside the teacher when they do the class or when they sit outside underneath a gum tree. It is not just numbers; I think it is a matter of working together with communities, the education department engaging with the communities, and putting together a curriculum that suits. We have got whitefellas teaching language – Bangerang language here – and that is the way it is supposed to be and that is the way we want it to be because our language does not only belong to us as blackfellas now, it belongs to everybody in our country. We have the right to teach anybody and everybody that

wants to learn it and share that. That is the way we go about it in the north-east, and I think it would be quite easy to mirror image right across our state.

As I said, there are 38 traditional owner groups in our state; there are only 11 represented by the RAPs that speak for 75 per cent of our country. I think the education department has got to recognise the whole 38 groups and engage with all the groups and not just with what the government says – the RAP elders – because that RAP system has become a hindrance to black communities. It is dividing and conquering black communities, and it is affecting our education. So what the education department has got to do is engage with everybody and not just with what the Victorian government says: ‘You’ve only got to engage with the RAP elders’. Because the RAP elders, as we all know and for those who do not know, have been given the right to talk for cultural heritage. That is all. They are not the traditional owners. They are corporations that have been set up by the government. They have not got the right to speak for education – how we teach our kids’ education. They have not got the right to call themselves traditional owners. All they have the right to do, and it is legislated – it is written in the legislation, the *Heritage Act* – is speak for cultural heritage. That is a big issue. So the education department has to be able to engage with the whole 38 traditional owner groups and align with the treaty process.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Darren. Ms Bath, do you want to ask some questions?

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much for being with us today. I listened to the very beginning of your conversation with us, and you spoke about your support plans and out-of-home care for very vulnerable children. Could you unpack that a little bit more – the needs that are there – and I guess we are looking for recommendations for government as well, so recommendations for government about out-of-home care. That is about dealing with some of the trauma of editorialising, from my perspective, because when you can take away the trauma, then the learning can take place in schools. You might want to comment on that. Thank you.

Dozer ATKINSON: I think that the trauma will never, ever be able to be extinguished. The trauma is very much part of who we are as Aboriginal people today.

Melina BATH: I guess from a child’s point of view in a classroom, how can we get them ready to learn through those support plans so that they are ready to succeed in this modern-day world?

Dozer ATKINSON: Make the classroom culturally safe.

Melina BATH: Sure.

Dozer ATKINSON: Yarrunga Primary School has made the whole school culturally safe so that children that are in out-of-home care that are students at this school when they come to school are coming to a culturally safe space. All these children are living in non-Indigenous care now, and 40 per cent of the school number at Yarrunga are Aboriginal – 40 per cent of the school number.

Melina BATH: So it is an exemplar school – it is a very good working model from your perspective?

Dozer ATKINSON: It is. It is a very good working model, and I would say it is a very good example of introducing Aboriginal culture into the curriculum. They teach Bangerang as part of their curriculum now, and that is to all children. The children in out-of-home care that I work with through Mungab – I oversee their cultural support plans – the ones that are at this school are leaping forward in leaps and bounds with their education because their culture is part of their education.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Could I ask one more question, Chair, and then I will stop? In terms of VACCA, could you describe I guess your relationship or your organised relationship with VACCA? Some of their commentary to us, or their submission to us, talks about children moving from primary school to secondary college and there is that great disengagement. There are really two questions there – apologies, Uncle Dozer – so VACCA as an entity and then that recommendation or their commentary that they have found about that disengagement.

Dozer ATKINSON: Look, I will start off with – I have spent some time employed with VACCA. I did not agree with their business because culture was something that sat in the corner and it was not a main state of the way they engaged or cared for children. I just must say that. I cannot see VACCA in a very good light when it

comes to supporting our children, plus they have lost the true meaning of what VACCA could be or should be. It is a \$65 million organisation now that is not – I do not really want to go down that track, but they are not doing what they are supposed to do for children in education. That is my true belief after spending time there. Because the organisation is set up – look, it is none of my business; I do not think I should go there. But anyway, VACCA I do not –

Melina BATH: I did not want to put you in a difficult position, and I guess –

Dozer ATKINSON: I do not agree with how VACCA do business when it comes to working with our children. The other question is that we lose our children from primary school into high school. You know, taking that step out of the primary into the high school is huge for any child. The expectations of a high school that is more culturally unsafe than a primary school is part of the reason why we are losing our children. Put back in the schools the Koori support workers. I know we have got the KESOs and we have got all these, but they only come once in a blue moon to visit the school. Do you know what I mean? That has really affected our children's retention. Our black kids need somebody in that school for their whole journey, as I said earlier. That is a sad fact, that we only have an Aboriginal support worker visit these schools in times of need or when they can fit it into what is expected within their position. But the funding should be created or secured somehow for every single state school in this country or in this state. They should have a designated black teacher or black support worker, and we do not see that in schools anymore. We see the KESOs come and go all the time, but it is not what our children need. Our children need somebody. They need Koori rooms, and we see our hospitals all now have a designated space for Aboriginal people. Them sorts of things should be in our schools as well. That is my personal view. If we want a higher retention and we want kids to be part of that gap closing, these things have got to be put in place for Aboriginal children.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dozer. I know you have got an appointment coming up, so I just want to say thank you so much for imparting your knowledge and your experience in relation to the language and connecting with the country and the knowledge that we need to have in schools. With your submission, hopefully our recommendations will have more success stories like yourself, where Indigenous families have more success and have their children reach higher education moving forward. Hopefully we can impart that in our recommendations to the government, so thank you very much for your time. It has been an invaluable submission. Thank you very much for your time today.

Witness withdrew.