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Introduction: On Indigenous Education

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There have been notable exceptions of various scope and scale– the ongoing development of Maori education, the numerous community-based and bicultural programs developed by Native American communities, and larger scale bilingual literacy campaigns with Quecha communities in South America (e.g., McCarty, 2002; Hornberger, 2008).¹ But the inadequate and inequitable educational provision for Indigenous communities and youth continues internationally – a matter stated forcefully in the *Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous People's Rights in Education* in 2006² and stated again at the 2009 *World Indigenous Peoples Conference: Education* in Melbourne³. At the heart of the problem, according to Indigenous Elders, educators and researchers is a fundamental historical disregard for Indigenous traditions, cultures and languages (Spring, 2003). Brayboy and Castagno (p.1) here remind us that educational matters pivot on issues of power in all of its diverse and complex productive and destructive forms: the power of communities and cultures to determine and shape their pasts and futures, the power of educational, social and economic politics and policies to shift and alter what teachers and learners do in schools, classrooms and informal educational settings; the power of face-to-face pedagogical exchange; the power of mainstream educational knowledge and discourse in economic and social participation; and the power of cultural traditions, languages and beliefs in learning and in building sustainable communities and futures.

This special edition of *Teaching Education* features four new important research papers on Indigenous education. There are no simple answers here but some clear policy lessons. The papers describe the complex policy contexts of Native American, Maori, Aborigine and Torres Strait Islander education – examining the implications of current test and accountability driven policies on schools in the US, New Zealand and Australia. Throughout you will find valuable reviews of research and bibliographical resources. They comment further on alternative policy approaches that emphasise culturally-based, community-focused, and scaffolded professional models that can yield improved conventional educational outcomes and sustainable school improvement with demonstrable benefits for Indigenous communities and learners.

¹ See also the work of Russell Bishop and colleagues at the University of Waikato, http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/departments/index.php?dept_id=20&page_id=2639, retrieved 16/1/09.

² See <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/IKS/cool.html>, retrieved 16/1/09.

³ <http://www.wipce2008.com/>, retrieved 16/1/09.

These papers were commissioned jointly by the editors and the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, Queensland University of Technology and the Queensland Studies Authority, the state curriculum board.⁴ We were responding to the current government policy push for large-scale community and educational intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The Australian context has been marked two moves: first, the Howard Government's large scale, controversial intervention in child welfare and community development begun in 2007. This policy, marked by major increases in policing, welfare and health staff and infrastructure in many remote Aboriginal communities, legal action on child welfare and abuse, target setting in the reduction of substance abuse and violence, has been met with a combination of praise and bitter debate. Subsequently, in 2008, the newly elected Rudd government issued a formal apology for the "Stolen Generations" and committed itself to reviewing the terms of the community intervention.⁵ It also announced a major focus and funding of interventions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. At this moment, there is an unprecedented moment of Indigenous and White Australian, community and national, bipartisan support for a strong focus on reform and renewal in the education of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Yet the directions for that reform remain unclear and contentious.

The new Federal government has moved towards four new policy settlements: the development of a national curriculum; a push towards the expansion of standardized national testing and competitive publication of school performance data; a new accountability system with a strong emphasis on socioeconomically disadvantaged funding; and a new settlement on teaching salaries and professional development. With the Federal government's public embrace of the "new reforms" of Joel Klein in New York (Gillard, 2008)– there has been anticipation in the press, unions, and amongst the research community that this presages a move towards an Australian version of UK and US policies: with a strong emphasis on test-driven accountability, funding by test results, the encouragement of public/private partnerships, and a reregulation of teachers work via merit pay, alternative recruitment and pathways schemes. As this edition goes to press – many of these policy debates are ongoing.

But while there is clear consensus that the current educational and community situation requires action – the evidence on how to proceed remains unclear. In this context, there were two major questions addressed in these papers. First, what are the documented effects of test-driven accountability on Indigenous education? Second, what kinds of programmatic educational agendas that might contribute to the overall improvement of Indigenous cultural life, civic and economic participation and community power. We – and most in the field – begin from that crucial sociological and cultural caveat: that educational policies, plans and practices in and of themselves by definition cannot 'compensate' for

⁴ These policy discussions involved Chris Sarra, Kim Bannikoff, Ray Land, John Davis, Myrah Driese, and Paul Herschell. See:

<http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/syllabus/577.html>;

<http://www.strongersmarter.qut.edu.au/index.html>, retrieved 16/1/09.

⁵ http://www.dfat.gov.au/indigenous_background/index.html, retrieved 19/1/09.

destructive material and cultural conditions, genocidal histories and deteriorating economies (Luke, 2006). However, as these papers show, there is evidence that some centralized approaches to policy can have significant collateral effects on conventionally measured achievement, on community culture, and on the lives of learners and teachers.

As Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy and Angela Castagno aptly state the history of American Indian Education has been “a battle over power” (p.1). In two parallel lines of argument, Brayboy and Castagno and Teresa McCarty review the impacts of *No Child Left Behind* accountability policy on American Indian schools and communities. One of the major critiques of the research base of the National Reading Panel was that it did not include studies of second language and indigenous learners (e.g., Garan, 2001). Brayboy and Castagno review state-reported achievement data, arguing that baseline levels of achievement remain low after the first five years of the policy. They also note the numerous state-level cases of manipulation and misinterpretation of test-score benchmarks and reporting. McCarty’s re-analysis of NAEP data - sample test measures reported independently of state accountability/funding self-reports – shows there have been no significant literacy gains in achievement among Indigenous students. Further, Val Klenowski’s report on her current work on Indigenous assessment shows that there is little explicit consideration of issues of linguistic and cultural diversity of Indigenous students in most major assessment schemes.

Brayboy and Castagno and McCarty go on to document the range of collateral effects – from increased attrition and exclusion rates to the further cultural exclusion of many students. There has been a narrowing of the curriculum, with ongoing neglect of curriculum content and pedagogical approaches that incorporate indigenous knowledge, history, languages and cultural practice. This, they argue, creates a fundamental policy contradiction: that the push for improved indigenous performance through tightened, scripted approaches to the teaching of mainstream ‘basics’ in literacy and numeracy may preclude and constrain teachers’ and communities’ efforts to implement culturally appropriate and culturally responsive pedagogies. Teachers’ engagement with Indigenous knowledge and language appears in decline from a low baseline, despite the mandating of Indigenous cultural content. McCarty, further, documents troubling examples of the flattening out of classroom discourse and exchange that occur under centrally scripted approaches to teaching and learning.

Part of the problem is a binary divide in policy formation: an ‘either/or’ situation where schools must *either* pursue acquisition of basic skills in English and mainstream ‘basics’ *or* build approaches around Indigenous knowledge and wisdom, history and culture. This is often construed as a programmatic decision between a focus on improving overall Indigenous performance on mainstream, conventional educational outcomes and thereby closing the “equity gap”, conventionally measured – or a focus on culturally appropriate pedagogy, which is defined and reviewed here by Brayboy and Castagno.

The problem of balancing the tensions between residual and emergent, essentialist and blended, mainstream and local knowledge traditions is a perennial one in all curriculum, instruction and assessment. And there is no

small amount of irony in the new transnational curriculum settlement. National and state educational systems speak a rhetoric around the production of human capital for the 'new' information and globalised economies. But they are left to enforce, with increasing funding stakes, a toolkit left over from industrial schooling: basic print literacy and numeracy skills and canonical, and a defense of traditional values, literature and knowledge (Luke, 2007).

The effective programs documented in these papers indicate that the binary policy divide is, at best, misleading. Brayboy and Castagno and McCarty go on to review the extensive case study work on effective community-based schooling that explicitly engages with students' cultural knowledges, languages and community histories and practices. They document numerous Indigenous programs that have succeeded in establishing closer connections between schooling and community culture, through reconstructions of the cultural and social relations of power and knowledge at the school and classroom level. In so doing, such programs have generated improvements not only in community engagement and the potential for education for cultural sustainability, but as well, they have shown a capacity to generate more sustainable and profound improvements in traditionally measured educational achievement and attainment.

McNaughton and Lai's intervention with Maori and Pacifica students in Auckland, New Zealand explores in depth the dimensions of effective approaches. They describe scaffolded approaches to reading instruction that have generated sustainable effects in conventionally measured reading achievement. These models are premised on an understanding of the cultural knowledges that Maori and Pacifica students bring to school, an extension of McNaughton's (2002) descriptions of two-way, bicultural approaches to pedagogy. Yet they also reflect the well-established conventions of sustainable school renewal built around improved teacher expertise and professionalism (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). This contrasts with the limits of a strong, scripted emphasis on basic decoding in reading – an approach that McCarty, Brayboy and Castagno also critique. Here McNaughton and Lai provide empirical evidence that sustainable improvement in reading comprehension for urban Maori and Pacifica students can be achieved through a strong emphasis on professional development and local curriculum development – that is, that teachers provided with new theory and practice, engaged knowledge of learners' cultures and communities can build programs of durable and generalisable efficacy.

So what does the evidence tell us? Whatever their intentions, centrally scripted, mandated policies that attempt to close the equity gap through a strong emphasis on central, test-driven accountability have, at best, mixed effects. In some instances and domains, including early mathematics achievement, demonstrable gains have been made. But there is considerable debate around purported gains on state-reported testing: the NAEP data does not show demonstrable and sustainable improvements in conventional achievement. As Klenowski argues, there is much work to be done in the cultural development and adaptation of authentic assessment and assessment-for-learning to move beyond the limits of narrow approaches to testing.

These articles offer well-documented case data that culturally-based approaches to curriculum, instruction and assessment with a strong emphasis on community-engagement, school-renewal and teacher professionalism have the potential for generating sustainable improvement in educational participation and achievement. Translating this into scalable, broadly implemented renewal efforts in Indigenous education which dovetail with community renewal and sustainability efforts remains the task at hand – made even more urgent by the current economic crises facing nations, systems and communities.

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