

Indigenous education and literacy policy in Australia: bringing learning back to the debate

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Abstract

In a policy landscape dominated by forces that seek to continually reshape education according to market logics, there are particular impacts on the seemingly intractable crisis of Indigenous education policy-making. Entrenched discourses of deficit result in education policy continually being ‘done to’ communities, with little heed paid to the effects of such efforts on the learning opportunities available to young Indigenous learners, particularly those living in remote communities. This paper examines the contemporary network of policy levers that come to shape how literacy policy is framed for Indigenous Australians through narratives of failure and crisis. In doing so, we ask what learning is made (im)possible and what are some of the ‘flattening’ effects on literacy curriculum and pedagogy as a result? Further, this paper seeks to open up the conversation around what learning is possible when the policy landscape is unflattened, when policy is ‘done with’ communities, and when pedagogical practices are opened up, rather than closed down.

Keywords

Literacy, Indigenous education, Direct Instruction, education policy

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Introduction

Literacy programs form a crucial component of Indigenous education, however approaches to literacy education are not developed in a vacuum. Practitioners and researchers working in Indigenous education soon come to realise that this is a politically fraught, and often controversial space at the sharp end of debates. Beyond the day-to-day practice and pedagogy of literacy education at the ‘chalkface’, is a broader symbolic domain in which Indigenous education is connected to highly contested issues of socio-economic development, Indigenous identity, social justice and good governance. Consequently, Indigenous education in Australia has been defined by sharp political contestation (Calma, 2009) and has typically oscillated between the pursuit of local, cultural imperatives through self-determined development, and the pursuit of statistical parity through the replication of ‘normal’ education practices and structures (Fogarty 2013; Fogarty et al., 2015; Rowse, 2002). These often ideological contests pervade the broader Indigenous affairs policy landscape in which Indigenous literacy education must take place. Consequently, shifts in the policy landscape have direct effects on the way that literacy is taught to Indigenous students. In this paper, we make clear the broader socio-political network of levers, both global and domestic, that shape

how literacy policy is framed for Indigenous Australians and question the effects of contemporary policy approaches.

Setting the scene

Twenty years ago a great educator in the remote north of Australia coined a school motto, ‘Constant change is here to stay!’ This clever observation on the Northern Territory and Commonwealth education bureaucratic process could be considered prescient by anyone who has had anything to do with remote Indigenous education.¹ It begs the question though, what has two decades of constant change in policy and approach produced in the Indigenous education space?

At one level, a contemporary ‘remote’ Indigenous classroom hasn’t really changed that much. It usually sits in a school that feels like a beaten up old car that has been through many a rebuild (or building education revolution). The chassis has had some work, but this educational vehicle still has the same dents in critical places and the engine lacks power and drive. At first glance, the classroom certainly looks better than it did twenty years ago. Old pieces of wooden form board that were once painted to become black boards have been transformed; they have become permanently affixed white boards (symbolic perhaps?). Computers and tablets are further evidence of some type of progress, but they sit on a new generation of old desks and chairs that are covered in the same smears of indeterminate ‘kid smudge’ that they always were. While students are certainly using gadgets unheard of twenty years ago, the change promised by the IT revolution feels pretty flat here. Promises of amazing digital distance delivery are still a pipe dream. Day to day classroom practice is still mostly about chalk and talk.

The kids have changed though; at least, on the outside. The clothes are a little hipper, footwear is now usually present and ear pieces and smartphones comprise a new addition to the remote school uniform. In truth, however, they are just the same happy, laughing, switched on, turned off, ‘disengaged youth’ of a dozen government reports ago. One difference is that their demographic cohort is growing exponentially. Their attendance at school, paradoxically, is not. The students in this metaphorical class probably represent less than half of those who should be filling the chairs. In front of them stands one of the new guard of young teachers from Sydney or Melbourne (or somewhere else a long way away), fresh faced and earnest in their desire to ‘help’. Next to her (male teachers are hard to find) stands an older Aboriginal teacher’s assistant. She will have done ‘plenty of big mob teaching’ and has spent countless hours assisting white southern teachers who are lost in their first encounter with the realities of remote cross-cultural living.

Somewhere, toiling away, will be a few dedicated long termers who have committed themselves to a life long struggle in these important sites of social (re)production. Too often though, they are being told by ‘the system’ that their community education approaches, based on decades of pedagogic and intercultural experience, are passé. Education is now about literacy and numeracy outcomes. Full stop, no new sentence. Move on to the next NAPLAN test and enter your attendance figures. It’s hard not to feel that the life, learning and hope for what was once seen as a long term, intergenerational, pedagogic development project has been squeezed out. In its stead, we find the proliferation of basic literacy and numeracy programs reborn as the sum total of the remote Indigenous learning experience, with deficit as the *raison d’être*. How have we arrived at this increasingly narrow vision of ‘literacy policy’ and where does literacy learning fit in this new order?

Indigenous literacy and education policy-making

There can be little doubt that literacy education for Indigenous students has become a key focal point for contemporary debates about the relationship between Australian governments, Indigenous people and development (see Austin-Broos, 2001; Hughes & Hughes, 2010; Pearson, 2011b). While these are important debates—and, indeed, have considerable relevance as part of a broader discussion about the purposes and goals of Indigenous education—they also divorce the development of literacy programs from the reality that educational communities face on the ground and ignore these communities’ pedagogic concerns. The sense of disconnection between policy and practice is strongest in remote areas of Australia, where the experience and prior knowledge of Indigenous students can differ in substantive ways from that of their peers in urban and regional Australia (Schwab, 2012). Reconnecting literacy policy with the lived reality of Indigenous learning is imperative if literacy goals, as outlined in policy documents such as the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016) are to ever come to fruition.

In order to enable policy and pedagogy to work best together, it is first necessary to delineate the symbiotic relationship between the two (Fogarty, 2013). We do this by explaining the effects of contemporary policy levers on literacy education for Indigenous learners. Our discussion is based on an approach to policy analysis that recognizes that policy ‘problems’ are actively produced as part of policy making, and which seeks to unearth the ‘deep-seated’ cultural values and political rationalities that underpin and define policy problems (Bacchi, 2009, pp.1-7).

Over the last two decades, neoliberal political ideology—which problematizes state provision of social services and advocates the development of forms of governance that encourage institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market (Larner, 2000, p12)—has been influential within Australian and international contexts. The ubiquity of

neoliberal politics has resulted in paradigmatic shifts in policy practice in both education and Indigenous Affairs fields (Lingard et al., 2012). We outline these relevant shifts in the education and Indigenous Affairs policy paradigms below, before further elaborating on how these shifts have affected literacy learning for Indigenous students. We argue that these shifting policy paradigms have converged in ways that ‘flatten’ or reduce opportunities to develop innovative and inclusive literacy programs, particularly in remote Indigenous contexts.

Shifts in the education policy paradigm: the rise of neoliberalism and ‘deficit metrics’

John Fischetti (2014) exposes the neoliberalisation of education as a global movement. He traces the spread of such approaches through parts of the western world, with their beginnings in Great Britain, spreading to Canada and the US and gaining traction under the *No Child Left Behind Policy* of President George Bush Jnr. As Fogarty et al. (2015, p.3) note, this movement, or paradigmatic shift in education, has allowed for the increasing privatisation of education and for moves away from investment in localised public education by government. It has also promoted the proliferation of standardised pedagogic approaches, and the packaging of readymade literacy and numeracy programs.ⁱⁱ

At the heart of this paradigm shift is a restructuring of educational apparatus and purpose to fulfil neo-liberal ideals of marketization, commodification and development whereby education becomes solely a function of the economic. This in turn promulgates an argument where education as a commodity must be subject to the whims of the market and its associated strictures of accountability (Apple, 2006; Au, 2009; Connell, 2013). The effect of this is that education ceases to be a public good and becomes instead a commodity to be

traded as individuals act as rational consumers with choice in an unfettered market (Apple, 2006; Bartlett et. al, 2002; Hantzopoulos & Shirazi, 2014; Raduntz, 2005). In the shift from public good to a private commodity, education is framed as a product for production, one where labour development is the primary purpose (Li, 2007; 2011). School becomes a training ground for the workplace and a microcosm of the world of work, rather than a place for situated, deeply contextualised and situated learning that connects to the importance of land, family, community and culture (Altman, 2009; Fogarty; 2013; Schwab, 2012). These commitments become secondary to the economic function of schooling as a factor of work readiness (Au, 2009; Li, 2011).

At one level, formalised western schooling has always had an intrinsic relationship with concerns of markets, labour and capital. However, Hantzopoulos and Shirazi (2014) make the point that this has now become all pervasive and is increasingly positioned as essential to social stability, economic growth, and national and even global security, where students compete for individual advancement and competitiveness in the global market. With the rise of new sites for the production of knowledge as a commodity for the market, so too has there become a need to continually monitor and assess the efficacy of schools and programs. As with other areas of public policy such as health and welfare, neo-liberal logic requires that a set of metrics be established as benchmarks to test whether or not expenditure is producing the desired results. At the same time, the ranking of schools or hospitals (for example) helps create new hierarchies which then facilitate the ideal that the rational consumer should be able to choose the *best* (according the predetermined metrics) school, hospital or other service. This choice, of course, comes at a price and is instrumental in establishing a market. While this explanation is necessarily fundamental, our point here is that the introduction of standardised testing and its flow on effects upon pedagogy are intrinsically linked to the global shift towards neoliberal ideals.

The development of testing regimes to measure educational outcomes (and subsequently rank site of production according to a normative set of criterion) have been critical in enabling education systems and government to exert increased control over the class room. On the one hand the proliferation of ‘audit culture’ (Strathern, 2000) allows close scrutiny of where dollars are spent in education, while on the other hand complex processes of knowledge transfer and production are ‘rendered technical’ (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007) so as to become visible and malleable for state apparatus such as an education bureaucracy. As Luke (2009) points out, “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” (p. 4). Since the early 2000s, education in Australia has been characterised by moves towards culture-blind standardised testing (Klenowski, 2009) and increasingly commodified, generic pedagogic approaches such as Direct Instruction and Explicit Instruction (Luke, 2014).

This has produced two related effects on Indigenous literacy education. The first effect is a politicisation of Indigenous student literacy learning (Nakata, 2003; Nakata et al., 2012). Indigenous education is at the coalface of attempts to structure the values and habits of the next generation of Indigenous people and has become a space that is highly symbolic of the possibilities for the State’s reform of Indigenous people’s behaviour. This, in turn, has led to an over-simplified conception of literacy learning and the development of an unnecessary binary between standardised literacy learning programs and Indigenous language immersion options.ⁱⁱⁱ The second effect on Indigenous literacy education is a high reliance within policy-making and program development on the use of metrics that compare and contrast learning outcomes for Indigenous students with those of non-Indigenous students. The legitimacy provided to such metrics results in the exclusion of other possible indicators of policy success or failure and the domination of a discourse of deficit regarding Indigenous students (Fforde

et al., 2013). In particular, these metrics of deficit (Sullivan, 2013) result in the silencing and exclusion of alternative indicators and markers of success that might arise from greater engagement with Indigenous students, families and literacy educators (Tracey et al., 2016).

Shifts in the Indigenous Affairs paradigm

While there have been global shifts in education, there have also been seismic movements in the underlying ideals of Indigenous affairs policy at a national level. Sanders argues that there has always been a tension between equality and difference in Australian Indigenous Affairs (Sanders, 2014, p.1). Building on Tim Rowse's work (2002; 2005; 2010; 2012), Sanders suggests that until the late 1990s 'Indigenous difference' was celebrated and policy and programs were expected to be shaped by the self-determined aspirations of Indigenous people.^{iv} Within this paradigm, however, there always existed an argument for equality flowing from an increasingly vociferous international movement for Indigenous rights (Dodson, 2012; United Nations, 2008). Consequently, the dual aspirations of self-determination and equality were seen to mutually beneficial. After the election of the Howard federal government in 1996, the recognition of Aboriginal difference within policy approaches came to be seen as increasingly detrimental to the pursuit of equality.^v This suited the socially conservative ideological position of the Howard government's stance on Indigenous issues, and a gradual but deliberate shift towards mainstreaming and normalisation (Altman & Hinkson, 2007; Dodson & Smith, 2003; Sullivan, 2011) occurred.

The governance arrangements that were central to Aboriginal self-determination, including ATSIC, were dismantled. Both the self-determination policy paradigm and remote Aboriginal communities were cast as failures and new policy strategies were introduced ranging from the contractual (such as shared responsibility agreements) to the outright coercive (welfare conditionality and SEAM). The belief that both policy and Aboriginal people had failed to improve the social conditions of remote Aboriginal communities provided the rationale for the highly interventionist Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) in 2007 (Altman, 2007; Garling et al., 2008). Much has been written about the genesis and impact of this policy intervention so we will not repeat that here (see Altman and Hinkson, 2007; Lovell 2014; Shaw, 2013). It is sufficient for our argument to say this approach was the antithesis of earlier ideals of Aboriginal self-determination.

Sullivan (2013) sums up the results of this set of policy positions succinctly:

‘By the end of its term, the Howard government had succeeded in entrenching disenchantment with Australia’s Indigenous people. They were more likely to be publicly characterised as bad people, who were administered by bad organisations and were wilfully compounding their disadvantage by recalcitrance in wasting the wider public’s benevolence. Public discourse had become so polarised that acknowledging any negative circumstances in Indigenous communities became tantamount to conceding the case for irredeemable dysfunction advanced by the most conservative of mainstream critics. In this environment, normalisation, even radical assimilation, appeared the only solution’ (p. 363).

As in education policy, neoliberal techniques of governance led to the proliferation of primarily statistical representations of Indigenous people. In particular, census data garnered more importance in the Indigenous affairs space and the ‘normalisation’ of Indigenous people became a key focus. Key indicators of disadvantage such as life expectancy, mortality rates, health and education outcomes, suicide rates and incarceration began to delineate a clear disparity between non-Indigenous and Indigenous populations. This gradually morphed into policy settings that became the ‘Closing the gap’ (CtG) approach of the Rudd Labor government after it came to power in 2007.^{vi vii} The emergence of this rationality provides a powerful moral case for better provision and funding of services for Indigenous people, including education. For example, Indigenous communities become seen as entitled to the same standards of service and infrastructure as those available to non-Indigenous communities of a similar size and location (Sullivan 2011, pp100-102). However, less positively, the close the gap era has also enabled the framing of Indigenous people in terms of ‘deficit’ by focusing on how Indigenous people fail to meet non-Indigenous norms of attainment in education and other fields (Fforde et al., 2013, pp.165-166). Patrick Sullivan (2013) has described these measures as ‘Deficit metrics’ (p.354). The focus on Indigenous failure and deficit has helped to shift the locus of policy and educational development away from Indigenous communities and towards state and federal governments.

A perfect storm for Indigenous literacy education

Literacy education for Indigenous students is developed within a complex policy landscape that is influenced by shifting norms about both the appropriate purpose of education and effective approaches to Indigenous Affairs policy (Altman, 2007; 2009; Dodson, 2010; 2012; Fogarty, 2013; Luke, 2009; 2014; Nakata, 2003; Pearson, 2011b).

When we put these two strands of analysis together, we can show (a) why Indigenous literacy education has come to occupy a particularly visible position in policy and public discourses on Indigenous development and education and (b) why the perspectives of Indigenous communities and of literacy educators fail to gain traction or influence in the policy and program development process.

In relation to (a): in education, trends towards standardisation of curriculum, assessment and educational outcomes have made literacy highly visible as a recognisably important element of education. It also makes one-size-fits-all or standardised approaches to literacy education appealing. Meanwhile language differences are an instantly identifiable point of difference between non-Indigenous and (especially remote) Indigenous Australians. Shifts in the Indigenous Affairs paradigm make such points of difference into a *problem* for policy development and efficacy. The concomitant shift towards normalisation in program delivery results in difference being seen as ‘deficit’. Guenther (2013) notes that ‘in the last decade a number of changes in the education system have led to the difference being highlighted — to such an extent that what had been an ‘othering’ of remote students (and their families) has turned into marginalisation that is described in terms of disadvantage, deficit and failure. One of the primary instruments used to reinforce this discourse has been the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing’ (p157).

In relation to (b): education—particularly remote Indigenous education—has been repositioned as a strategy to teach Indigenous children the habits of responsible, active citizenship (including the values of productive workers). Schooling is particularly important in this context because it offers a chance to mould a generation that is still open to reform in a way that their parents’ generation may not be. Parents and community members are variously described as passive/ignorant (Beresford et al., 2012; Hughes & Hughes, 2010) (especially

about the value of schooling), or disruptive/damaging (e.g. taking kids out of school for cultural activities) (Hughes, 2007; Johns, 2006).

Such approaches are at odds with research that shows that positive educational outcomes occur when training and educational development is appropriately linked with communities' needs and development goals (Catts & Gelade, 2002; McRae et al., 2000; Miller, 2005). One major study, for instance, found positive outcomes for Indigenous education relied on a range of factors including: community ownership and involvement; the incorporation of Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values; the establishment of strong partnerships with communities; the capacity to be flexible regarding course design, content and delivery; the quality of staff; and the availability of extensive student support services (Miller, 2005). The literature is also unequivocal in stating that Indigenous knowledge and local development aspirations must form a central component of educational and pedagogic design (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Anderson, 2003; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Fordham et al., 2010; Henry et al., 1999; Kral, 2010; O'Callaghan, 2005; Schwab, 2006).

Effects on Indigenous education

As noted, broader shifts in education and Indigenous affairs policy have had have resulted in reductionist and non-contextualised conceptions of Indigenous educational 'problems' and solutions. This is evident in the ways in which education's pedagogic parameters have been affected, especially in remote regions of Australia. For example, contemporary Indigenous affairs policy is driven by the federal government's \$4.9 Billion dollar *Indigenous Advancement Strategy* (IAS), which was released in 2014 and contains a range of measures in its children and schooling strand.^{viii} A major focus of the IAS program is on remote school attendance. This strand notes among its policy *raison detre*':

- One-third of the gap in educational attainment is attributed to poorer school attendance.
- A child's education is considered at risk if they frequently miss more than half a day of school a week (less than 90 per cent attendance).
- Indigenous students are estimated to be behind non-Indigenous students by the equivalent of approximately two and a half years of schooling in the tested areas of literacy, science and mathematics.^{ix}

While we are in no way wishing to deflate the importance of school attendance, the problem comes in the policy logic such simplistic assumptions of 'normalisation' cause. Here we see the 'rendering technical' of extremely complex issues. In this case, non-attendance is attributed as being the cause of one third of the 'gap' in educational attainment. The solution therefore becomes to simply get the kids to school. Of course, such simplistic constructions ignore a multiplicity of factors that are involved, most notably the potential that it is the learning itself that students may be resisting. As Heitmeyer, Nilan and O'Brien (1996) warned, nearly two decades prior to this strategy, a focus on attendance misses the more important issue of learning and would have potentially limiting consequences for young Aboriginal learners.

We see a similarly reductionist approach to education promulgated by the bipartisan 'Closing the Gap' strategy. Closing the gap might seem admirable in principle, but the practical realities are much more difficult. A complex array of factors need to be addressed, including major barriers such as geographical isolation and other physical access issues, alongside cultural and socioeconomic factors (Altman & Fogarty, 2010). Leaving aside the deficit discourse of closing the gap, which focuses on what Indigenous learners cannot do, it does highlight the enormous disparities in outcomes compared to non-Indigenous Australians. However, there are multiple factors of social disadvantage that come into play,

including poverty, access to quality health, employment and housing, as well as high levels of violence, alcohol and drug dependency, and unacceptable levels of suicide and incarceration rates. These factors compound the level of educational disadvantage when combined with geolocation, language, parental income and education, access to schools and libraries.

The literacy myth and finding the ‘silver bullet’

As broad influences on Indigenous education have promulgated a narrowing of what education can be, the field of Indigenous education has become increasingly subject to ‘silver bullet remedies to the literacy and numeracy ‘deficit’. Underlying the various policy levers such as CtG and the IAS, is a commitment to what Graff (1979) describes as the *literacy myth*, where literacy education is seen as a panacea to societal troubles. Graff suggests that while literacy learning is an important part of the education of young Indigenous learners, it is not, in itself, an answer to the deep-seated social and economic disadvantage that they experience. As such, any program or package that claims to be a one-size-fits-all approach to ‘fixing’ Indigenous literacy should be treated with caution.

In examining the current policy approaches we strongly concur with Allan Luke (2008) who argues that “to assume that the problems of English language and literacy can all be solved between the four walls of the classroom or school is another iteration of the literacy myth” (p359). He argues that current approaches to education are flawed in the sense that they are based on the view that the “dilemmas of Indigenous achievement” can be solved by finding “the right curriculum or pedagogical approach” (p.359). The limitations of viewing pedagogy as a solution to Aboriginal disadvantage is also highlighted by Luke (2008) who argues that:

‘If there were a theoretical and empirical flaw to current educational policy approaches, it was a strong belief that the finding of the right curriculum or pedagogical approach had the potential to “solve” the dilemmas of indigenous achievement. The logic of this argument both misrecognises the problem as one of “achievement”, rather than improved material, bodily and cultural conditions, and it misplaces the solution in “pedagogy” per se, rather than in the overlapping fields of capital exchange where pedagogy, schooling and language use occur’ (p. 359).

Kral (2010) concurs, arguing that:

‘The literacy debate rarely addresses the critical social and historical factors that also account for why literacy levels among remote Indigenous youth are lower than their mainstream, urban, English-as-a-first-language speaking counterparts. The focus on schooling obscures the less obvious fact that we must also be cognisant of the broader sociocultural factors associated with literacy acquisition, maintenance and transmission in newly-literate contexts such as those of the remote Indigenous world. There are many complex and intersecting factors that can be attributed to the lower rates of literacy, many of which actually have little to do with the quality of teaching or resources, school attendance or lower expectations of competence’ (p.1).

Despite this, the last two decades have been replete with examples of programs and intervention strategies solely aimed at addressing issues in Indigenous literacy programs, without being connected to broader pedagogic approaches or attending to broader structural factors influencing learning. They have all met with limited degrees of success.

For example, in 1988 Western Australia introduced the *First Steps* program, with a particular focus on students considered to be ‘at risk’ in their literacy learning. The program

provided a holistic package of curriculum and pedagogical strategies, including professional development for staff, school development priorities, curriculum materials and direct support for classroom teachers (Australian Council for Educational Research, 1993; Batten et. al, 1998). First Steps was focused on whole school implementation of literacy strategies. This was closely followed by the *English Language and Numeracy Program for Aboriginal Students* (ELAN) in 1991, based on elements from First Steps. Objectives of ELAN included developing teacher knowledge about Indigenous learners' literacy needs, as well as materials, resources and assessment strategies.

Perhaps the largest program to run in recent years was the National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP). NALP adopts an applied intervention, originally known as '[Scaffolding Literacy](#)', which was originally developed by Dr Brian Gray and Ms Wendy Cowey at the University of Canberra. NALP was initially trialled with Indigenous students in Alice Springs before being rolled out in Western Australia, The Northern Territory, New South Wales and South Australia in the early 2000s. The program was a discourse-based approach to literacy lessons, together with reading comprehension, spelling and writing support, and was initially considered to be successful (Cooper, 2008).

However, a significant systematic review of early literacy intervention programs conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (Meiers et al., 2013) found that accelerated literacy, NALP and First Steps had little or no evidence of efficacy and that it was not possible to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of these interventions (ACER, 1993; Deschamp, 1995; Dione-Rodgers, 2012; Gray, 2007; Robinson et al, 2009). This is particularly troubling, given the enormous amount of money and time invested into these programs.

It is also worrisome that the lessons of earlier efforts continue to be ignored. For example, nearly twenty years ago, the influential *Desert Schools* project found that "English

is essentially a foreign language in remote desert communities, even though it is the language of instruction in secondary age classrooms; also that the language ecology of such communities is complex and multilingual” (Clayton et al., 1996, p. 7). The project also argued for the recognition of a wide array of community languages and Aboriginal Englishes in the formation of curriculum and pedagogical strategies, alongside a better understanding of the language repertoires that students bring to their schooling. Despite this, it seems that programs for improving literacy continue to focus solely on English at the expense of other language development and cultural connection. The latest incarnation of the literacy silver bullet is a very proscriptive approach known as ‘Direct Instruction’.

Direct Instruction

In 2011 the federal government made a significant investment, to the tune of \$7.72 million, in Direct Instruction (DI), a literacy program which was developed out of research conducted in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s. Initially a trial was conducted in a small number of schools in Cape York, and then expanded during 2014 and 2015 to Aboriginal schools across Northern Australia, Queensland and Western Australia, (McCollow, 2012).

Direct Instruction (DI), (capitalised,) is a ‘carefully scripted and structured’ method of education designed by Dr. Zig Engelmann and Dr. Carl Bereiter in the 1960s (National Institute For Direct Instruction, 2014). Soon after, an educational evaluation, entitled Project Follow Through (Tarver, 1998), was charged with finding the most useful methods of teaching at risk children from kindergarten to Grade 3. It found that students instructed with Engelmann’s method consistently outperformed control groups in basic, cognitive, and problem solving areas. However, these findings also showed a great deal of variance in success between school sites, and reported that teachers of DI were often critical of the

quality of the stories and materials offered by the DI program (Ryder et al., 2006). Perhaps the most significant concern is in the mandating of one particular literacy program to the exclusion of other possible approaches with little or no evidence that Direct Instruction is superior. As Fogarty and Schwab (2012) note:

‘In what is often cited as the benchmark evaluation of the Direct Instruction approach, Becker and Gersten (1982) found that while early gains may appear as a result of the emphasis on decoding text, those gains evaporate and sometimes reverse in the late primary years as learning requires comprehension and not just decoding. This inability to move beyond decoding to comprehension is particularly significant for children of low income and limited English-speaking families who may find themselves left behind (Becker & Gersten 1982). Recent research in Australia reports increases in teacher attrition, decreases in student retention and completion, and a propensity for any Indigenous or minority perspectives to disappear from the curriculum under such approaches.’

Proponents of DI insist that its strategies have yielded success in a number of significantly different educational contexts, including teaching students with learning disabilities and students from English as a Second Language backgrounds (Tarver 1998). Educators and schools that embrace the DI approach assert that rigorous analysis of current systems reveals that students lack a grasp of the basic structures of language, and policies and funding bodies should focus on this issue. This issue, it is argued, cannot be fixed by focusing on locally or culturally responsive pedagogies, such as the ones suggested by Sleeter (2010), Ball (2009), or Sarra (2005). The work of John Hattie has been influential in fuelling these arguments. Hattie’s research (2012), assigned an ‘effect size’ to factors that impact on a student’s

learning and found that direct instruction was far more beneficial to learning than student led instruction. Critics of DI have long held that such approaches have detrimental effects on the holistic learning of students (Luke, 2014; Sleeter, 2010). They argue that the program does not offer students a “considered, coherent, and historically located curriculum” (Luke, 2014, p3). These researchers argue for culturally responsive pedagogies that are shaped by the cultural and social contexts of the student (Ball 2009; Sleeter, 2010).

In 2010, Direct Instruction was introduced across two Cape York schools – Aurukun and Coen, and then later in Hopevale, in an attempt to address failing educational standards and social unrest. Aboriginal lawyer and public figure Noel Pearson provided the conceptual basis for this approach, with the ultimate goal being ‘successful mainstream education that leads to complete economic integration’ (Dow, 2011, p.50). Recent events in Aurukun^x have seen a rekindling of criticism in certain educational spheres (ABC Online, 2016). The body of evidence does show that there has been some short-term improvement in most literacy areas. An early review undertaken by McCollow (2012), notes that teachers in Hopevale claim that DI has helped their students to improve their literacy, and that the highly scripted programs have given local Aboriginal teachers (graduates of the Remote Australian Aboriginal Teacher Education Program) confidence as educators that they did not have previously. A recent review by the Department of Education and Training (2016), however, shows that there is significant concern from both teachers and community about the amount of time in the school day being dedicated to Direct Instruction, and that the material is focused on stories from the United States, where the materials were developed. They argue that program tools that are so far removed from students’ personal cultural experience do nothing to inspire and motivate children to continue learning. This echoes the experiences of Dow (2011) who recalls her time as a teacher of Direct Instruction in Aurukun as one marred by confusion, frustration, and missed opportunities (p57).

In addition, critics such as Sarra (ABC Online, 2016) point to the disappointing attendance and literacy results of schools such as Hopevale and Aurukun. They claim the results are not compelling enough to justify the amount of time and money (some \$30 million over four years) invested in the Direct Instruction programs and materials (2016). Sarra claims that nearby Aboriginal communities such as Pormpuraaw are experiencing similar levels of success to Coen, and much better than Aurukun or Hopevale, using approaches grounded in community driven, student centred approaches to learning, such as those championed by the Stronger Smarter Institute, of which Sarra is the chair. Former executive principal of Aurukun, John Bray, suggests that the recent outbreak of violence and social unrest in the community is in part due to the use of DI in schools. He claims that DI further disengaged already at risk youth and created a climate of ‘complete distrust’ among parents and community that directly led to anti-social behaviour (Robertson, 2016).

While there is substantial (and highly contested) evidence that DI can improve school outcomes, (Hattie, 2012; Tarver, 1998) perhaps the most telling critique of its use in Indigenous schools is its prescribed goal of teaching basic literacy and numeracy to disadvantaged students. Many researchers (Cummins, 2007; Dow, 2011; Johnston & Hayes, 2008) argue that such an approach limits children and prepares them for a life of mediocrity. As Cummins (2007) tellingly claims, “no middle class suburban parent would ever permit this kind of cognitive decapitation of their children... skills for the poor. Knowledge for the rich.”

An evaluation of the DI trial (ACER, 2013) found that there was inconclusive evidence to support short term learning gains. As yet, there are no substantive measures of the medium and long term effects of DI programs being used in Aboriginal schools, however, a more recent report aimed specifically at outcomes in Aurukun does offer this conclusion: “It is the conclusion of this review that the richness of schooling has been compromised by

the pressure of delivering literacy and numeracy using only the DI approach. Going forward, a more balanced approach, contextualised for the Aurukun community, is required” (p.5). It is worth noting that DI is not an approach to language learning but primarily a remedial literacy program, and as such there remain serious questions about how appropriate it might be for second (or third, or fourth) language learners, such as Aboriginal children in remote communities.

Dow (2011) has critiqued the prescriptive focus on basic skills in the school curriculum, arguing that the world’s economy needs people who can engage with a whole range of convergent, multi-disciplinary skills to effectively meet the challenges of the future. She uses the example of a student who graduated from Direct Instruction classrooms only to find himself far behind the rest of the class in terms of critical and higher order thinking. Her suggestion is that if direct instruction was simply one (and only one) focus of his learning, he would not be experiencing the same levels of frustration and disengagement in mainstream schools. In this, she is supported by Robinson, (2009), and by many academics in Australia and internationally including Delpit (1988), Phillips (2011), and Luke (2014). This style of education only further marginalises pedagogies which seek to enable success in literacy in numeracy in ways which also include and value different sets of knowledge (Fogarty, 2010). Given the contestation in the research base, the lack of solid evidence in its application to remote Indigenous contexts and the high cost of the program, it is therefore surprising that DI continues to garner such a prominent place in remote literacy policy development.

Opening up Indigenous literacy to further pedagogical possibilities

At present, the goals of Indigenous literacy policy do not match with the linguistic, cultural and social contexts that young learners inhabit, particularly those living in remote

communities; nor do they encourage or make space for such perspectives and partnerships to form. Rather, current settings endorse proscriptive programs of literacy learning, such as DI, which empty out the realities of context. While there are a multitude of suggestions that can be made for bridging the divide between education policy-making and Indigenous literacy learning, the key is to be found through doing policy ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ communities.

One broad way forward that is consistently evident in the research base is the adoption of a ‘strengths-based approach’ (Fogarty et al, 2015; Gorringer & Spillman, 2008; Johnson, 2012). Using this ideal as a policy setting begins with a recognition of the capacities and abilities that Indigenous learners bring to the classroom, rather than focusing on reductive deficit discourses and narratives of lack that currently dominate policy settings. According to Armstrong et al. (2012), such a strengths-based approach connects to the resources that children bring with them to school, including their community knowledges, cultural identities, resilience, collaborative relationships, collective empowerment and engagement. Some examples of strength based approaches to learning include programs and frameworks such as experiential learning, Learning on Country and Red Dirt thinking. These approaches deliberately reject the deficit thinking that currently pervades the majority of education policy settings for remote Indigenous students. For example, Red Dirt thinking is a conceptual framework that begins in a premise that:

‘Education and schooling in remote communities should be relevant to the context (that is, the ‘red dirt’) in which it is provided... this (is) as a conceptual framework in which to challenge conventional wisdom about success, disadvantage and aspiration in remote schools’ (Guenther et al., 2013).

While space precludes a full analysis of these approaches, it should be noted that there is a growing body of literature and evidence that focuses on strength-based pedagogic approaches (Fogarty et al., 2015; Guenther et al., 2015; Osborne 2013).

While strength-based approaches are yet to be explicitly connected to literacy programs, they provide a possible starting point for the development of literacy approaches that are more fully inclusive of community and local perspectives. They could form the basis of partnerships that incorporate multiple levels of government, schools, learners, their families and broader communities. Such partnerships of learning will need to be locally-driven and deeply contextualised if they are to deliver effective literacy outcomes. At a local level communities and educators are already challenging recent approaches to literacy learning. They are ‘pushing back’ by continuing to find ways to connect learning and literacy to the lived experience of the educational communities and students with whom they are working. Educators in a multitude of remote contexts are seeking “programs geared to the intercultural and multilingual realities of daily life in remote contexts” (Altman & Fogarty, 2010, p. 122). As Clayton et al. noted back in 1996, there always was, and will continue to be, a need for curriculum materials to recognise and respond to local language ecologies, as well as materials that address students’ individual and community interests. Strength-based approaches may be able to provide a paradigm in which local content can be better integrated into both education policy and literacy learning at a local level.

It would seem that, in the Indigenous education policy space, ‘literacy’ dangles, unconnected to context and embedded in its own discourse of deficit metrics which mean little to the remote Indigenous students that we began this paper with. If literacy outcomes are the desired result, it is clear that policy must shift to enable approaches that are grounded and connected to local realities. In recent times there has been a dis-remembering that Indigenous

perspectives must be included in these educational possibilities. This has been particularly evident in Indigenous literacy policy settings aimed at rectifying 'deficits' in literacy in remote Indigenous Australia. Such approaches simply replicate policy failure. In order to reconnect literacy learning with the lived experience of students we should reject the reactive policy levers framed in narratives of failure and crisis. Rather, we need to reinvigorate the power of localised pedagogy and praxis, while demanding literacy policy that enables learning and teaching based in strength and diversity.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The pervasive mindset of needing to 'fix' education in the remote north has characterised the policy approaches of successive federal governments, and has led to a series of sub-standard results.

ⁱⁱ Direct Instruction, which ensures that 'all details of instruction' are controlled so as to 'minimize the chance of students' misinterpreting the information being taught and to maximize the reinforcing effect of instruction,' provide just one example of such standardized approaches (National Institute for Direct Instruction 2014)

ⁱⁱⁱ An example of this is the bilingual debate in the NT exacerbated by discursive shifts associated with the NTER intervention. While not a focus of this paper, the politicisation and vehement public debate surrounding the 'bilingual' programs in the NT demonstrate the symbiotic nature of politics and literacy policy. It also demonstrates the gap that can exist between national Indigenous affairs policy and the educational aspirations of people on the ground. These debates are ably covered by Simpson (2009) and Waller and McCallum (2014).

^{iv} They were also in response to past injustices

^v Sullivan 2013, traces this back further noting that in the early 1990s 'COAG intermittently produced 'line in the sand' statements that aim to re settle relationship between the government and Indigenous citizens

^{vi} 'Closing the Gap' was officially adopted by the Council of Australian Governments in early 2008 on the back of then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology speech to the stolen generations. However, it is fair to say that all Australian governments in the modern policy era have looked to close the gap, even though comprehensive statistics from the national census to measure progress have been available only since 1971 (Altman and Fogarty 2010). 'Closing the gap' as a policy setting should also be distinguished from earlier 'Close the Gap' Indigenous health campaign.

^{vii} It is worth noting that the Close the gap approach did not reject the previous government's NTER but rather rebadged it as 'stronger futures' and incorporated this as part of their remote Indigenous policy strategy.

^{viii} <http://www.indigenous.gov.au/indigenous-advancement-strategy> Viewed 28/10/2016

^{ix} <http://iaha.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/IAS-Presentation-20-August-2014-for-external-use.pptx> Viewed 28/10/2016

^x At the time of writing, Aurukun's primary school had been closed due to increasingly violent events in the school and community.