

THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON INCLUSIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

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My name is Vicki Wilson and I am currently employed by the Department of Education and Children's Services as the Principal Policy Officer with Aboriginal Education and Employment Services. I work with research and data as it relates to Aboriginal education in South Australia, and Indigenous education nationally. It is at the core of my work in developing and implementing high quality policy and plans that progress the implementation of the DECS Plan for Aboriginal Education.

My mother was a Katej woman from Central Australia. She was a part of the Stolen Generation and was bought to Adelaide in the early 1950s to study nursing. My father's family is from Truro in the Barossa Valley. They emigrated here from Cornwall in the mid 1850s. I was raised in a cross cultural household with plenty of relatives both black and white, dropping in, yarning, visiting, staying and leaving their kids in mum and dad's care for education. All of this has had a long lasting impact on my life and the work that I have been involved with for the past 25 years. I am a part of both cultures and I believe this gives me a unique insight. I strongly identify as an Aboriginal person and am equally proud of both sides of my heritage.

When asked to speak at this forum, I thought to myself, what could I possibly know about research in vulnerable communities?

A policy is a set of rules or guidelines to achieve an identified objective. Policy, both past and present drives education today, as it does all government service delivery. The COAG Closing the Gap policy agenda within the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) dictates that individual education systems will strive to close the gap between Aboriginal student outcomes and the outcomes of all other Australian students with education, health, housing and community safety targets clearly identified.

To further strengthen the Australian Government's commitment, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) approved the newly developed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan at its meeting on 15 April 2010.

The Action plan identifies national and jurisdictional action in six priority domains that research illustrates will contribute to improved outcomes in Indigenous education. They are:

1. Readiness for school
2. Engagement and connections
3. Attendance
4. Literacy and numeracy
5. Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development
6. Education and training pathways to real post-school outcomes.

South Australia has committed to closing the gap on Indigenous early childhood and schooling outcomes through the National Education Agreement and a series of education and early childhood National Partnerships.

Specifically, the Closing the Gap targets are:

- universal access to early learning for all 4 year olds by 2013
- in 5 years (by 2013) all Indigenous 4 year olds in remote Indigenous communities will have access to a quality early childhood education program
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing, and numeracy within a decade (by 2018)
- at least halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020

The South Australian Strategic Plan identifies specific targets aimed at improving education outcomes, and in particular improvement in Aboriginal

student outcomes. The DECS Aboriginal Strategy 2005 – 2010 is the public education system's response to progress the achievement of those targets.

Both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan and the review of the DECS Aboriginal Strategy will inform the development of the next South Australian five year strategic plan aimed at, among other things, achieving the Closing the Gap targets.

Every state and territory public education system has its own Indigenous education policy, as does Catholic Education, and the private and independent sectors. However, despite the numerous layers of policy, education systems nationally still fail to accelerate improvement in education outcomes for Aboriginal children and students.

Mellor and Corrigan in the journal article titled 'New Effort Needed to Improve Indigenous Education' (<http://research.acer.edu.au/resdev/vol11/iss11/2>) state that a major concern relating to current policy in Indigenous education is that it is insufficiently supported by comprehensive and substantiated research evidence. I couldn't agree more. There is so much information about what works in improving Aboriginal student outcomes, what makes an effective teacher of Aboriginal students, what community should and shouldn't be doing, and the finger pointing that goes along with why Aboriginal students aren't achieving.

In reality, Indigenous education policy is determined nationally by Aboriginal student achievement data in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) national tests. Attendance and retention data is thrown into the mix, along with Year 12 completion data and the attainment of the South Australian Certificate of Education and its equivalent in other states and territories. This information has been used to provide the 2008 baseline data against which the COAG Closing the Gap targets will be measured. But, does it take into account the complexity of home and family life circumstances of Aboriginal children; or the chronic otitis media that affects most Australian

Aboriginal children resulting in hearing loss and learning difficulties; or the historically low expectations of education institutions and teachers when it comes to Aboriginal students; or the institutionalised racism that allows education authorities to continually make excuses for the low outcomes achieved. Instead, it relies on the information received about an individual student's performance on the designated day, and that student's measure against all other Australian students.

Some data about South Australia's Aboriginal students:

- There are currently 8,390 Aboriginal students in DECS schools and preschools, which is 5.1% of the total DECS enrolment
- South Australia has high rates of preschool enrolments amongst Aboriginal 3 and 4 year olds. In Term 2 2009, there were 1,218 Aboriginal children enrolled in state preschools, or 6.9% of total preschool enrolments
- 54% of Aboriginal students in SA attend a Category 1 or 2 school (that is schools with the highest index of disadvantage)
- 93% of Aboriginal learners have an Individual Learning Plan that engages each young person in connecting their strengths and learning with strategies and resources they can use for personal development, as well as for planning their future.
- Aboriginal students constitute a significant number of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. 2,858 Aboriginal students have been identified by schools as having Standard Australian English as an additional language or dialect and have been supported as ESL students. ESL strategies include assessment of English language learning needs, and appropriate intervention strategies using the ESL Scales, explicit teaching of language, and whole of school approaches to improving student literacy outcomes, including literacy audits.
- NAPLAN results in 2009 show an increase in the percentage of Aboriginal students at or above national minimum standard in all aspects in year 5 and 9 and all aspects except numeracy in year 7.
- In 2009, there were 103 Aboriginal students within DECS schools who completed their SACE, compared with 60 Aboriginal students in 2005

- In the period of 2005-2007 there were 2,500 young people involved in Innovative Community Action Networks (ICAN) programs - 29% were Aboriginal students. ICAN supports young people to re-engage with pathways through flexible learning programs that have a focus on literacy and numeracy.

There have been increases but there is a long road to be travelled to significantly close the gap.

At the end of 2008, Indigenous specific and targeted funding that had previously been provided to individual jurisdictions through the Indigenous Education Agreement were rolled into Special Purpose Payments funding provided to state treasuries for the education of all students under the National Education Agreement. In SA, DECS quarantined that funding for targeted support programs for Aboriginal children and students. Programs such as the employment of Aboriginal Community Education Officers to work with families and schools; Aboriginal Education Teachers to provide the much needed support for teachers of Aboriginal students in addressing the teaching and learning program to be inclusive of Aboriginal student needs; and the provision of an extensive tutorial assistance program for Aboriginal learners to provide additional literacy and numeracy support.

There is a need for mainstream education and services to stand up and be accountable for closing the gap in Aboriginal student outcomes. But how does this filter down to the classroom practitioner who may have been doing what they do for the past 30 – 40 years?

It becomes an easy option and an excuse to explain away low Aboriginal learner outcomes by examining what goes wrong from the family and community end of the equation, and it can easily become a blaming exercise directed at parents and communities. Poor attendance is often excused as 'cultural business' or student's having 'gone walkabout' but may not necessarily examine what is happening for the student in the classroom; the

quality of the teaching and learning program being delivered; the skill of the teacher and the student to operate in a cross cultural setting; or the student's literacy level that may often detract from their ability to be included in the day to day learning experience. Teaching and learning programs must be inclusive of all learners in the classroom, not just the ones with above minimum standard NAPLAN results and regular attendance.

The research tells us that prenatal and postnatal care, combined with a stimulating and language rich environment that nurtures the child's developing brain will provide the footprint for academic success long before the child enters an education setting. The research also tells us that parents are first educators and that providing a proactive model of parent engagement in education is pivotal in improving the active participation of Aboriginal students in education programs and consequent improvement in outcomes. South Australia has led the field nationally with the expansion of the child and family centre model to encourage and support parental engagement in the child's education and wellbeing from birth to schooling. Children and family centres are being rolled out in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands in the state's far north; and in regional and metropolitan areas of high Aboriginal population density.

Aboriginal children are eligible to attend preschool at age 3 years, a full year earlier than non-Aboriginal children and considerable effort is made to engage Aboriginal parents in preschools. *Learning Together* is a DECS program for families with children aged birth to four, and which has operated in South Australia since 2003. The program is based on national and international research affirming the crucial importance of the very early years of life in laying the foundation for children's learning and well-being. *Learning Together* focuses on the importance of children's oral language development, children being read to at an early age, the development of children's strong dispositions to learning, and the critical role that parents play in supporting their children. Development of the program took account of research highlighting the benefits of a preventative approach toward possible later difficulties for all children in vulnerable communities, rather than an approach

where some children and families are targeted for intervention. Currently, *Learning Together* is actively supported by Aboriginal families. Furthermore, *Learning Together @ Home* is a program that primarily home visits families to encourage them to support their child's learning and development through play.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Year 8-12 Apparent FTE Retention Rate for Aboriginal students in 2009 was 54.9% compared with 79.5% for all DECS students. In 2005, it was 36.7% compared with 72.4% for all other students. The Year 10-12 FTE Apparent Retention Rate has risen from 43.9% in 2005, compared with 75.4% for all DECS students; and in 2009 was 62.3% compared to 79.0% for all other students.

Aboriginal year 12 enrolments are at the highest in over 10 years. In 1999, the enrolment figures show there were 88.9 year 12 enrolments which increased to 333.1 in 2009. This has meant a substantial growth of 274% or 244.2 Aboriginal students enrolled in year 12 from 1999 to 2009, indicating a significant improvement in the levels of participation by Aboriginal students and learners

While national literacy and numeracy tests show indigenous children perform below non-indigenous students, the outcomes are lower in remote areas. A recent Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) report stated that "education provides the key to self-determination and active and equal participation in society". It is good that indigenous children learn their kinship languages, but they also need English literacy and numeracy. They need teachers with high expectations and persistence, principals with autonomy to make important decisions, and engaged communities actively supporting their education. Higher levels of staffing are provided to these sites, and are supported by the employment of community members in Aboriginal Education Worker and Anangu teacher roles. Yet literacy and numeracy outcomes remain low. On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, children attend school on average three out of every five days in a school week. Schools and

communities must work together in partnership to manage cultural obligations and education programs so that opportunities are not missed and children attend and actively engage in school. The ACER report went on to say that for children in remote indigenous communities who want a better future, there is no substitute for at least 10 years of rigorous school education. Good literacy instruction practices in schools are one step in the school reform needed to turn around educational achievement in remote communities. Others need to tackle low attendance and poor retention rates.

However, no one single response is the answer to improving outcomes. Improvement in Aboriginal education outcomes can be fast tracked by what we know in light of new research and understanding about neuroscience; by building better community school relationships; by ensuring quality teaching and learning programs that are rigorous, have high expectations and take into account the needs of the individual learner; by training and engaging quality teachers skilled and with the commitment to developing effective and positive relationships with Aboriginal learners and their families; and through resourcing that enables systems and schools to provide teaching and learning programs that accelerate Aboriginal student learning outcomes.

There is also an inherent danger of treating all Indigenous students as if they are the same despite their regional and socioeconomic locations. Aboriginal learners in South Australia come from a diverse range of backgrounds, cultural groups and socio-economic settings. You cannot make the assumption that what is good for one group of children will work with another. Each child is an individual and comes with their own specific learning requirements.

To conclude, I will include some protocols about do's and don'ts based on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies guidelines for ethical research (<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/ethical.html>).

In summary, research with and about Indigenous peoples must have a basis on mutual understanding, engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and the Indigenous person.

Researchers must be prepared to:

1. consult, negotiate and develop a mutual understanding about the research, its foundations and its purpose
2. respect, recognise and involve Indigenous knowledge systems and processes; recognise the diversity of Indigenous peoples and communities across Australia; respect and preserve the intellectual and cultural property rights of Indigenous peoples; and involve Indigenous peoples as research partners and collaborators
3. Discuss with the Indigenous peoples the benefits and outcomes of research results for the community. Indigenous communities should not be disadvantaged as a result of a research project.
4. Negotiate a formal agreement for the conduct of the research project – one that is based on good faith and informed consent.

Thank you for taking the time to listen.