

THE POWER OF WORDS: BIAS AND ASSUMPTIONS IN THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

This paper argues that “genuine” engagement and consultation is required where Indigenous voice is included within the policy development process for “true” progress to be achieved. With the ever increasing engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the decision making processes of Indigenous education, it is anticipated that there will be provision of opportunities for better outcomes and a greater acceptance of the policy within community (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). This paper is derived from a larger project where the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2011) was critically analysed using Fairclough’s (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis framework and Rigney’s (1999) Indigenist Research Principles. Within this study, the underlying assumptions and bias identified within the policy and how it positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were articulated. The major findings that emerged from the data included a) the homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, b) the maintenance of the prevalent dominant ideology within policy, and finally c) the expectation by the power elite of increased engagement and connections by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples without consideration of the detrimental effects of past policies and reforms.

Introduction

This paper is a component of a larger project whereby the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, from here on referred to as the Plan (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA] 2011), was critically analysed using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis [CDA] framework (2001) and Rigney's Indigenist Research Principles (1999). The initial part of this discussion establishes the purpose of policy analysis and its contribution to the literature. Secondly, an overview of the methodological approach and the theoretical framework that informed the study will be provided. Thirdly, an example of how these contrasting approaches – one being based within Western academia and the other, within the tenets of Indigenous methodologies – somehow complement each other to form the basis of data analysis. Finally, as synopsis of the major findings of the study presented – in this case, the bias and assumptions within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.

Policy analysis

Henry, Lingard, Rizvi and Taylor (2013: 35) define policy analysis as “the study of what governments do, why and with what effects”. Empirical research critically analysing policy is beneficial for a number of key stakeholders to assist in change and reform. However, as Henry et al. (2013) suggest, Government generally produces policy because of some economic, social or political factor. In other cases, the production of a policy may be due to the policy cycle, where policy is developed to build on previous policy (*incremental*) or is complementing and developed from other broader policies (*intertextual*). Therefore, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is both incremental and intertextual in nature. That is, it builds on recommendations as provided within the *Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous*

Education 2005–2008 *for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs* (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research 2009).

There is little research in the critical analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy as discourse (Taylor 2004). This study provides insight to the assumptions prevalent within the Plan that has been developed to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes. Furthermore, the study presents how language within the Plan has been used to maintain issues of power and dominance. Within this study, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) as a primary document is critically analysed using CDA.

Description of the Plan

In 2011, the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and released for distribution and implementation. It provided six domains including the Readiness for School; Engagement and Connections; Attendance; Numeracy and Literacy; Leadership, Quality Teaching and Workforce Development; and Pathways to Post-School Options. I use past tense as the Plan was a five-year plan that was reviewed and evaluated at the end of 2014. Nine months post-Plan and we are still waiting for its replacement or revised approach. The Final Evaluation Report by Acil Allen Consulting (Acil Allen Consulting Pty. Ltd. 2014) suggested the revision or replacement needed to occur sooner rather than later to maintain the momentum of and sustain the gains achieved in the implementation of the Plan.

The Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) was developed to address the recommendations provided within the Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education developed by the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research (David Unaipon College

of Indigenous Education and Research 2009). To challenge and to change the existing ideology of low educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts as ‘normal’ and that incremental improvements were ‘acceptable’. Further to this, it was part of the response from Federal government to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It had fifty-five key actions and primarily, provided the data necessary for tracking the Closing the Gap targets pertaining to education. That is, it is the ramification of other policies complementing and elaborating on broader, more generalised goals.

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is divided into four separate sections. The first section is an introduction that positions the Plan as a ramification of previous policy and describes the processes undertaken prior to its release. Consultation with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative bodies and educators as well as non-Indigenous education providers occurred. Further to this, the domains were informed by the *Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs* (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009) that stated the factors of engagement and connections as well as attendance, to name a few, need addressing to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Henry et al. (2013) explains the process of building on previous policy and complementing policy as being incremental and intertextual respectively. The Plan, therefore, is incremental and intertextual as it builds on from policy and their evaluation as well as being developed from broader policy including the National Education Agreement [NEA] (COAG, 2012).

The second section further demonstrates the incremental and intertextual properties of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) where it describes the six domains in more detail and provides the goals and targets of the Plan. Further to this, it articulates the performance

indicators and outcomes that assist in its evaluation. Here, the Plan demonstrates how it complements broader policies. This is exemplified by each domain's primary outcome being derived from other policies including the NEA (COAG, 2012). For example, the initial outcome for the domain Engagement and Connections within the Plan states, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are engaged in and benefiting from schooling" (MCEECTYA, 2011a, p. 13). In comparison, one of the outcomes of the NEA is "All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling" (COAG, 2012, p. 4). Here, the all-encompassing reference to *all children* (COAG, 2012, p. 4) is exchanged with *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* (MCEECTYA, 2011a, p. 13) to ensure the Plan is specifically addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Following this, section three provides the jurisdictional State priorities that provide current State approaches that will assist in the implementation of the Plan and achieving its goals and targets. Here, strategies that are State specific are provided to demonstrate how the broader policies have been addressed to date within State policy. Reference is also made to the Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs) and their role within the national and systemic level assisting in addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (MCEECTYA, 2011a).

Finally, section four provides instruction on how the Plan's (MCEECDYA, 2011a) implementation will be monitored as well as the reporting processes required to maintain accountability and transparency. Here, the power elite establish their authoritative position as the 'overseers' of the implementation. In doing so, the power elite are drawing on "the use of ideology to create coalitions" developing a "basis for harmonized action" (Rein, 1983, p. 213). In this study, the power elite include both Federal and State government and their governmental agencies and the reader, being those at a local level including schools and

community. An overview of the Indigenous theoretical framework drawn on to provide a means to articulate my own lens follows.

Rigney's Indigenist Research Principles

To analyse the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011), I drew on Rigney's Indigenist Research Principles (1999) and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis [CDA] framework (2001). As a neophyte researcher, I found strength in Rigney's Principles and his approach when I read how "Indigenous Peoples must look to new anti-colonial epistemologies and methodologies to construct, re-discover, and/or re-affirm their knowledge and cultures" (Rigney 1999: 114); and in doing so, inform the struggle for self-determination by challenging the embedded Eurocentric context and colonial dominant power of educational institutions. Rigney's Indigenist Research Principles framework provided a means to include Indigenist principles by providing a strategy for research rather than a research process. In other words, the principles – Resistance as an emancipatory imperative; Political integrity; and Privileging Indigenous voice – provided a means to identify the key assumptions within the Plan by identifying the subtle issues of power and dominance evident and maintained in the policy discourse. Figure 1.1 demonstrates how each of these principles is separate and yet interrelated, supporting the other.

Rigney's Indigenist Research Principles (1999) were articulated with Fairclough's CDA framework (2001). In particular, CDA provided a lens through which to critique and analyse the discourse used within the Plan. Discourse is in all social activities whether written or spoken, verbal or non-verbal or a combination of any means of communication and as a result, becomes a form of social practice. In other words, rather than being an external component to society, language is a fundamental part of society and its means to communicate.

Furthermore, language is integral to every social practice where social processes have been established and organise the ways in which people interact. This is demonstrated by the orders of discourse. A term originally used by Foucault (1971), orders of discourse is defined by Fairclough as “social structuring of semiotic difference, a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning” (Fairclough 2001: 232). In other words, the internal relations, being the semiotic and linguistic factors demonstrated within a text, are combined with the external factors, being the social positioning of the individuals as well as their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, which influences the text’s recontextualisation and enactment (Taylor 2004).

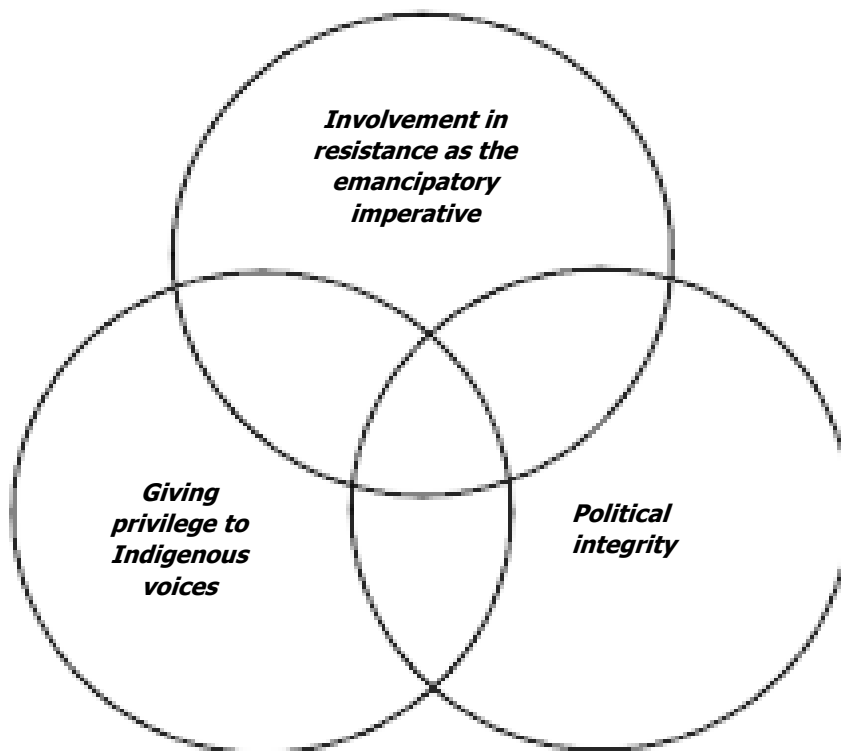


Figure 1.1. Rigney’s three Indigenist Research Principles (Rigney 1999).

Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA provides opportunities for the political integrity of the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) to be analysed as to how it positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to what extent it is arguing for or against the people. The discourses of the Plan, whilst being objective and factual, demonstrates the social order. Through the use of CDA and the analysis of policy discourse the researcher is able to gain an understanding of how power elites (those that benefit most from the current social order) may or may not have a vested interest in the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students not being resolved.

CDA was deemed as the most appropriate approach for analysis of data. Circa 1983, Fairclough (2013) began developing an analytical framework that investigated language use and its ability to maintain and sustain dominant ideology and power. This methodology differed from the work of linguists and sociolinguists as it sought to understand how characteristics of discourse influenced societal conditions (Fairclough 2011). Figure 2 depicts a broad three-stage framework when analysing text; that is, Stage 1: description of the text; Stage 2: interpretation of the relationship between the text and interaction; and Stage 3: explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context.

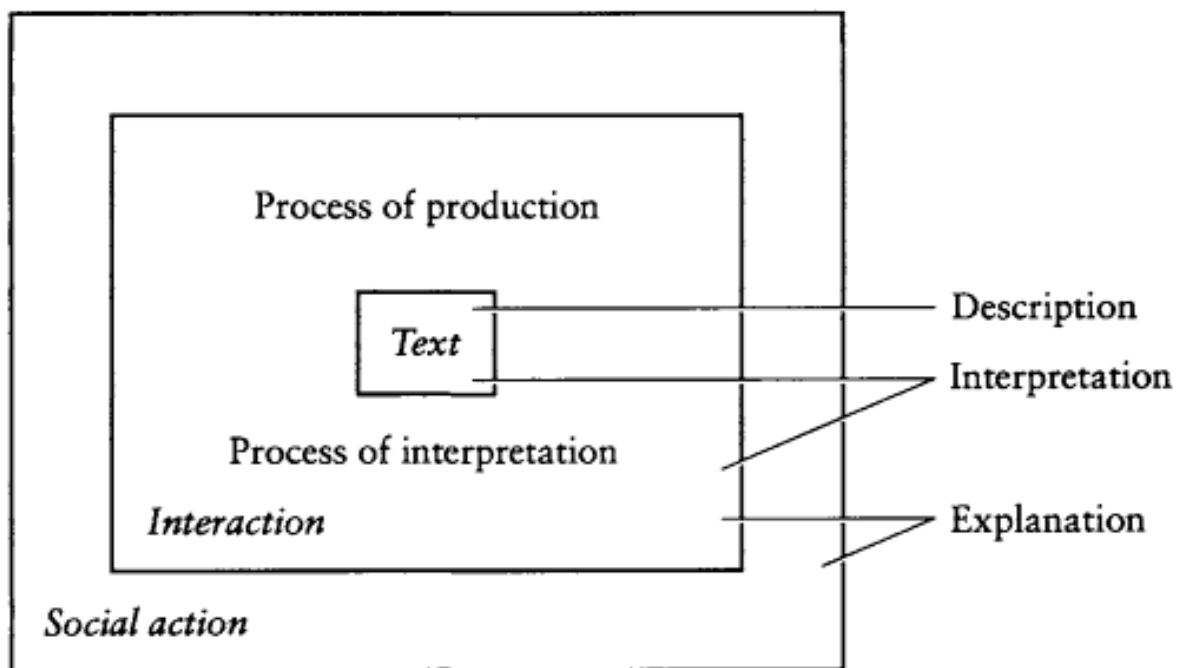


Figure 2 Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for Critical Discourse Analysis. Taken from "Critical Language Awareness", by N. Fairclough, 2014.

The language features within discourse

Specific textual features of discourse including declarative statements and euphemistic expressions, were identified and analysed within this study. The experiential value of the word choices used within the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) was analysed to determine the ideological stance taken by the power elite. In this study, the power elite was defined as consisting of and inclusive of all governments and governmental agencies.

Declarative statements

Sentence structure and, in particular, the declarative statements used to convey the power elite's ideology are relevant to the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and the reports pertaining to its progress of implementation. The targets and objectives for increasing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples Engagement and Connections with the decision making process of education provided examples of such declarative statements. This is exemplified by one of the actions to be undertaken within the systemic level being “Education providers will strengthen school accountability and reporting to families and the community on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 18). Here, the sectors; being the State, Catholic and the Independent systems, are instructed to work with schools to ensure that the processes undertaken to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are transparent and shared with families and community.

Euphemistic expressions

Euphemisms are generally words used to substitute more familiar words that have a negative connotation. Formal word choices and use of euphemisms within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community within its production, distribution and consumption. That is, an investigation into the complexity and formality of word choices within the Plan including the use of specific terminology when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was necessary to establish how they are positioned within the discourse. For example, within the 2010 Annual Report on the Plan (2011b), there is a footnote that states that the use of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ is the preferred term when referring to Australia’s First Nations people rather than the generic term of ‘Indigenous’.

Classification schemes

Classification schemes enable the power elite to divide “some aspect of reality which is built upon a particular ideological representation of the reality” (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 26). In

other words, the power elite has a preoccupation with establishing an ideological stance and shared view with the reader. As a result, word choice is influenced and there is tendency to use near synonyms to establish the ideology within the text, otherwise referred to as overwording. Here, in this study, the use of synonyms and the use of overwording was analysed to ascertain the power elite's ideological stance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement and Connections in decision making as well as the increasing of student Attendance within the school setting.

Expressive modality

Modality demonstrates how the power elite sees themselves as an authority to make statements on a particular subject, in this case how to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, or their evaluation of the issue (Fairclough, 2001b). In particular, expressive modality indicates “the speaker's authority with respect to the truth or probability of a representation of reality” (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 105). In other words, within this study, the means that the power elite has established their authority and demonstrated their understanding and trustworthiness in addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students educational attainment. Expressive modality is exemplified using such modal verbs including *are*, *may*, *might* and *probably* that indicate a commitment to the truth. Such examples of expressive modality were sought for within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose outlined in the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) identifies that school education contributes to closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their non-Indigenous counterparts. For example, the Plan states that

Governments have agreed to take urgent action to close the gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians (MCEECDYA 2011: 3)

A declarative statement occurs within the excerpt to emphasize the necessity for action. The Plan declares that there are inconsistencies between the livelihoods of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their non-Indigenous counterparts and that this needs to be addressed.

Further to this, expressive modality allows for the identification of evaluative statements. The use of the phrase *urgent action* works to emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in need of assistance. That is, they are to attain a certain undisclosed way of life determined by the dominant ideology held by the power elite.

This excerpt demonstrates the assimilatory properties still held within modern Australian society. That is, despite the call for reconciliation, and the recognition of the oppressive past reforms of assimilation and dispossession, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their ways of living and being are still judged by the ideology of superiority and dominance (see Brady 1997; Foley 2003; Rigney 2002). Cultural and social assumptions informed by the ideology of power and dominance are made; that there is a need for assistance. The excerpt positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as incapable of improving current conditions without assistance, minimising the opportunity for self-determination. Rigney's Indigenist Research Principle, resistance as the emancipatory imperative, seeks to dispute against the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples as “oppressed victims in need of charity” (Foley 2003: 48). The taken for granted assumptions demonstrate a binary where there is a definite distinction between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their non-Indigenous counterparts ways of living and livelihoods.

Further to this, the use of the adjective *urgent* determines the time frame in which this needs to be addressed. Therefore, by using this term, the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) assumes the role of authority. In doing so, the power elite further positions their ideological stance and maintains the dominant ideology of Australian society. The excerpt implicitly exerts that there is an obligation to address the current inequalities evident in Australian society in the imminent future through the development and implementation of policy. As Henry, Lingard, Rizvi and Taylor (2013: 24) state, policy implicitly “reflects functionalist assumptions about the way society works, that is, that society is underpinned by a value consensus and that the various institutions in society contribute to the ongoing stability of the whole”. That is, the values or dominant ideology regarding the livelihoods of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is one that needs addressing because they are not attaining the standard of living of other Australians.

The analysis of the literature showed that there was a lack of research into Indigenous education policy and its influence on improving student educational outcomes. As a result, the lack of literature supported the need for the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011). Hence, the study’s intention was to promote discussion around policy decision-making and potential policy revision and not to solve the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Major findings

Three major findings emerged from the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011). These included (a) the assumption about the homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, (b) the maintenance of the prevalent dominant ideology within policy, and finally (c) the expectation of Engagement and Connections and increased Attendance within education without considering the detrimental effects of past policies and reforms. Further to this, bias was also identified such as a one size fits all solution and the terms of reference.

Homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The presupposition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a homogenous collective group was identified as one of the key assumptions in the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011). Being a governmental policy, the Plan addresses the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. The actions provided in the Plan are to be implemented by all three levels at a National, Systemic and Local level. However, in its present form, the Plan provides a ‘one size fits all’ solution to be adapted at a Local level. It places the onus on schools to engage with and recontextualise the Plan to be appropriate for their context. The attention on schools emphasises the crucial importance of engagement and connection with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve the attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The factors influencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students educational outcomes were considered however, the geographical location and the cultural intricacies of individual groups is ignored that schools will need to navigate in their process of engaging with community. Further, the intergenerational trauma prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as the result of past policies and reforms will affect their willingness to engage and connect within the school environment.

Maintenance of the dominant ideology

Another presupposition that compliments the previous assumption is the maintenance of the dominant ideology of the power elite. Based within the past reforms and policies including assimilation, the belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are in need of assistance is still evident in modern Australian society. The Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) continues to maintain, sustain and uphold the dominant ideology using language and discourse and as a result, discourages the engagement and connections, and attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community. Furthermore, there is the assumption that the ‘deficit view’ is to be replaced with genuine partnerships therefore encouraging the improved attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and yet, the Plan advocates for maintaining the dominant ideology through the implicit bias evident. This taken for granted assumption negatively positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within a policy that is advocating for their potential achievements and life outcomes and encouraging collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with education providers.

Ignoring the detrimental effects of past policies

The disregard of the underlying factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes is evident in the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011). Reviews and evaluations of policy, such as the *Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs* (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research 2009), highlight the detrimental effect of past policies and reforms on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, regardless, the Plan demonstrates an expectation

of engagement from all stakeholders including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. That is, while evidence shows that intergenerational trauma encourages resistance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to connect and attend schools, the Plan advocates for schools to actively engage with community with the premise that attendance will improve as a result. There is little recognition of the trust and reconciliatory relationships that would need to be established or the time needed to develop such relationships. Once again, the onus is placed on schools to create such partnerships with little advice or guidance on how this is to be achieved. This taken for granted assumption provided opportunities to assist the power elite to shift the paradigm from the failure of policy to the underachievement of schools to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Bias within the discourse

Prior to presenting the intricate biases within the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) itself, note that essentially the Plan is prejudicial in that it looks to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students only. In doing so, it further develops the binary between Australian Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people with the general Australian population. That is because rather than being all inclusive of low-achieving and disengaging students so that all Australians can benefit from the strategies employed, the Plan is explicit on who it is for and the reasons why. In other words, the Plan and its goals and targets are to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Terms of reference

The Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) constantly interchanges the terms of reference for non-Indigenous Australians. However, it consistently refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as such and in doing so, ensures that positive and acceptable terms of reference are maintained. In this example, it provides evidence of bias to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and not to non-Indigenous people. Whilst the Plan and its domains are addressing the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts, it maintains a binary construct explicitly highlighting the lack of educational attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the poor life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Maintenance of the dominant ideology

The superiority and dominant ideology of the power elite is still informed by the ingrained assimilatory properties of past reforms. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are, in the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011), represented as people requiring assistance. The repercussion in maintaining the dominant ideology is that self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is ignored. While Indigenous researchers such as Rigney (1999), Foley (2003) and Brady (1997) implore for the right for self-determination, to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take responsibility, government is reluctant to allow for self-determination (Gray & Beresford 2008). Instead, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community are to work within the regulated systems already in place and within the parameters as set by policy and the power elite.

One size fits all

There is a lack of recognition of the intricate differences within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the Plan's (MCEECDYA 2011) discourse. Here, bias is demonstrated through the assumption that the Plan can be adaptable to address the needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. That is, the Plan is a 'one size fits all' solution. The geographical location or the delicate intricacies and differences of the various groups within Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are ignored throughout the Plan. Rather than these issues informing the funding of the Plan to make it sustainable, overarching funding agreements and partnerships sustain its implementation.

Summary

The analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA 2011) demonstrated that there was indeed bias and assumption within the policy's discourse. The language used continues to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as incapable of improving and attaining the defined livelihood held by dominant ideology and in need of assistance further hindering the fight for self-determination. The established need to reimagine the ways of developing and actively participating in the decision making process further excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

These new forms of colonisation, whereby 'true' engagement and consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the decision making and policy developing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, ensure that Indigenous voice is excluded. This also ensures that the dominant ideology is maintained and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are unable to gain the opportunities for 'true' progress. Instead, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reminded of their position within modern Australian society through the use of discourses.

Further research to demonstrate and establish how these new forms of colonisation seek to dominant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is necessary. This study led to further questions being developed. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework (2001) has a particular stage within its analysis process that asks if those in power actually seek to find a solution or if they benefit from not resolving any of the inequity. This very question continues to taunt me and needs addressing in the near future.

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