

## **“IN 2017 WE SEEK TO BE HEARD”: DE-TANGLING THE CONTRADICTIONARY DISCOURSES THAT SILENCE INDIGENOUS VOICES IN EDUCATION**

### **Abstract**

Indigenous education policy, reviews and reports have consistently sought for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all levels of decision-making. The notion of Indigenous voice and therefore, providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples opportunity to contribute and address the perceived issues in Indigenous education emulates the notion of self-determination. However, despite policy rhetoric making claim to do this, actions and evidence suggest the silencing and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. In this paper, I will provide example of the various mechanisms ‘put in place’ by policy that counter the goodwill intentions shared in policy discourses. Identification of the discursive trickery ‘at play’ to allude to the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be explored.

### **Introduction**

*For the last quarter century, [...], we’ve seen seminal reports which have repeatedly emphasised that our people need to have a genuine say in our own lives and decisions that affect our peoples and communities. (National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, 2016, p. 5).*

As the above quote from the Redfern Statement illustrates, the struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have a definitive voice, and therefore self-determination, in the issues that directly effect and influence their lives is not something new. Indeed, policy and governmental rhetoric would suggest that this is happening or at least, seen as paramount. In the *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report 2016*, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull asserted that, “in order for policies and programmes to deliver desired outcomes, they must not only be built on evidence, but be developed in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities who will benefit from them” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016, p. 4). However, the

notion of partnership is often misunderstood and therefore, marginalisation of Indigenous peoples continues; founded within the ongoing colonial values embedded within the societal and institutional constructs of colonial Australia.

The continual dismissal of Indigenous voice and the assertion of deficit discourses homogenising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as ‘failing’ hidden within policy discourses perpetuate the notion of Indigenous peoples being ‘inferior’. Using the methodological approach, Indigenous Critical Discourse Analysis (Hogarth, 2017b), I intend to make explicit how government and policy continue to marginalise and silence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. My intention is to illustrate the contradicting discourses within political rhetoric and policy in regards to the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in policy, decision making and planning as a whole with some focus on education. I consider how the various mechanisms ‘put in place’ by policy counter the goodwill intentions shared in policy discourses and the influence of social conditions on the recontextualisation of policy in education.

### **The contradictory discourses**

A quick glimpse at the social conditions of production and interpretation and the unconscious series of processes that occur within all social interactions as evidenced in social media discourses illustrate how the explicit racist ideologies of colonial Australia still exist. The synergies and interrelationship between society and education ensure that policies produced to address and guide governmental actions to address the educational attainment of students continue to emanate assimilatory properties and ultimately, aim to shape the ideal citizen in this globalised neo-liberal world (Brown & Lauder, 1991). As a result, government and the anonymous policymakers enjoy a position of power that can influence attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes held in mainstream Australia about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Further to this, as Morgan et al. (2006) highlight, “invariably the nature, and consequently the outcome, of [the] education [provided is] constructed through and measured by non-Indigenous standards, values and philosophies. [Therefore,] the purpose of this education has been to assimilate Indigenous peoples into non-Indigenous cultures and societies” (Morgan et al., 2006, p. 231). In other words, the education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are given access to, acts to privilege Western values and standards and maintains the colonial view that Indigenous children are “open to change, education and salvation” (Armitage, 2014, p. 4).

### **What are political discourses suggesting is happening at a national level?**

Indeed, policy and governmental rhetoric would suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved in the decision making and planning of policy. In the Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report 2016, Turnbull asserts that, “as a nation we *will* walk side by side with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the journey of recognition and reconciliation, to build a promising future for all” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016, p. 4). The use of the term ‘will’ indicates that the reader is obligated to perform the action as requested. Furthermore, as Turnbull is ‘speaking’ from a position of authority as a member of the power elite, the discourse indicates the desire of the speaker to improve the imagined future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

However, the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the decision making process at a national level is minimal. Countering the ideological position of Turnbull, both the Redfern Statement (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016) and the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Referendum Council, 2017) speak about the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Indigenous education decision making and policymaking. The Redfern Statement specifically highlights the lack of Indigenous representation in education at the national level.

The recent rejection of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Referendum Council, 2017) challenges the commitment of government to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in “decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation” at national levels (Conifer, Brennan, Higgins, Crothers, & Wellington, 2017; Education Council, 2015, p. 3; Turnbull, 2017). Despite the extensive consultation process and the collective voice of Indigenous peoples found in the production of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, their voices have been silenced by government. The privileging of political agenda and Western values were upheld.

### **What are policy discourses in education suggesting?**

So, while policy discourses exude the illusion of neutrality, its rhetoric is punitive. The influence of institutional and societal constructs, values, bias and assumptions and the dominant ideologies maintained in colonial Australia about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is mirrored in the education field. Deficit discourses of perceived failure are perpetuated through the unsaid in Indigenous education policy. The silencing of Indigenous voice is hidden through the use of discursive trickery giving the illusion of space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to engage in decision-making and so forth (Hogarth, 2018 [First Online]).

The notion of partnerships to build engagement and participation in the “decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation” of Indigenous education, as illustrated in the current Australian Indigenous education policy, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015, from here on referred to as the Strategy, is fraught with assumptions (Education Council, 2015, p. 3). The Strategy ignores the fact that the Australian education workforce is dominated by non-Indigenous peoples. In 2016, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers made up just over 1 per cent of the total Australian teaching population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The assumed hegemonic position of the coloniser as the ‘knower’ about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories and cultures, is established through the sheer number of non-Indigenous peoples involved in educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Partnerships in education are therefore bound within the parameters set

by the coloniser and as a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be further marginalised, excluded or encouraged based on the generosity of the White administrator.

Alternatively, the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous peoples' rights in education (Morgan et al., 1999, 2006), an Indigenous produced policy document founded in the international human rights charters and conventions, asserts that the involvement of non-Indigenous peoples in Indigenous education should be negotiated. It advocates for the need for a strong local involvement in Indigenous education where there is a need for parents and community to "determine how and to what degree non-Indigenous peoples are involved in Indigenous education" (Morgan et al., 2006, p. 235). Championing the notion of self-determination, the collective Indigenous voice asserts the rights and agency of Indigenous peoples to transform Indigenous education.

### **Lack of representation**

An overview of the Australian educational context and the representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples directly involved in Indigenous education is necessary. While the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) project sought to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators in schools to provide mentors and role models for Indigenous students at the 'coal face', it also demonstrated the lack of Indigenous representation in executive roles (Johnson, Cherednichenko, & Rose, 2016). Johnson, Cherednichenko and Rose found that only 7 per cent of the 3,100 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander teachers held the position of Deputy Principal and only 3 per cent being in the role of Principal.

The lack of Indigenous representation at the local level and overrepresentation of other Australians, where the implementation of the Strategy (Education Council, 2015) is enacted, demonstrates the power relations and struggle evident in Indigenous education. Where the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous peoples' rights in education (Morgan et al., 1999, 2006) asserts that non-Indigenous peoples'

involvement is to be negotiated and controlled by Indigenous peoples, the realities of the current Australian context is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are underrepresented and therefore, their role in the decision making and recontextualisation of policy within schools is limited (Johnson et al., 2016). As a result, the coloniser maintains power and influence over the potential educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students simply because they are in positions of power and clearly outnumber Indigenous peoples and therefore, can readily silence Indigenous voices.

### **The role of non-Indigenous peoples**

At a national level, the role of non-Indigenous peoples in Indigenous education in positions of authority is extensive. Opportunity of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within policy making at the national level through their involvement within the Council of Australian Governments or Education Council is minimised as it involves the election of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within government. However, the opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to be included at a national level of sorts is presented through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group (ATSIEAG) (Education Council, 2015). However, ATSIEAG is a discursive trick (Hogarth, 2018 [First Online]).

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in ATSIEAG is minimal with only two Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples being identified (Council on Federal Financial Relations, 2016). The possibility and probability of the two Indigenous voices being silenced due to the discursal elements 'at play', the hegemonic position of the senior officials also within this group and the properties of orders of discourse are high. Due to the 'stacking' of non-Indigenous peoples within ATSIEAG, I argue this group is yet another non-Indigenous organisation involved in Indigenous education (Hogarth, 2018 [First Online]).

Interestingly, despite the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the educational workforce as previously discussed, the Strategy (Education Council, 2015) is written positioning non-Indigenous peoples as Other. The Strategy ignores the current disparities in the educational workforce and the fact that 97% of the Executive (Principals and Deputy Principals) who are interpreting and enacting the policy within schools are non-Indigenous (Johnson et al., 2016). Reference to non-Indigenous Australians is minimal and is used predominantly to illustrate the need for data collation to compare and contrast the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to “other Australians” (Education Council, 2015, p. 3). In turn, the polarization of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to other Australians creates a binary construct of difference and perpetuates the deficit view.

## **A vignette**

Prior to entering the academy, I was a classroom teacher for almost 20 years working in all three sectors of the Queensland education system. In this narrative, I found myself (yet again) being the only Aboriginal teacher. Here, I was located in a small country school with a high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population. I was often drawn on by other colleagues and the school leader to ‘handle’ the Indigenous students who had been labelled as disruptive and disrespectful students. On other occasions, Indigenous students who may have been the only student in their class for any given school day were sent to my class despite the age difference because the students felt their classroom teacher was disrespectful and ‘picked on them’ when the others were absent.

My role became one of being like a ‘cushion’ between the school and the community. Any issues that the families had in regards to the school, it was seen as my role to ‘get things changed’. Any issues the school had, it was my role to ‘pass on’ the expectations of the Principal. My agency and voice in that position was minimised by the push and pull tensions of expectations.

Rather than recognising the opportunity he had to liaise and build partnerships; encouraging parents and community to engage with the decision making and planning, the school leader silenced them. He did not engage and he did not speak with community unless it was to inform parents that their child was being excluded from class or the school as a whole. The lack of engagement further widened the 'gap' with parents and therefore, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in the "decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation" of Indigenous education was impossible. The hegemonic position and the assumption of superiority exuded by the school leader put a metaphorical wall more than 6 foot high at the school gate and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community was silenced.

## **Discussion**

I share this story to contextualise how I have seen the power of the coloniser enacted. I have observed the patriarchal superiority of a school leader who privileges his colonial values and knowledges, and disregarded Indigenous knowledges. I have seen and heard the explicit racist views of colleagues who flippantly ignored my Aboriginality because I was one of the 'better ones' and 'not like those others'. It is because of these reasons and many more that the title and ultimately, the objective of this book, encouraging for the system to be flipped; to give voice to those involved in education to have a say in education, that I now speak to the need for change. In Indigenous education, I argue that there is a need for transformation (Hogarth, 2018 [First Online]). As the authors of the Redfern Statement (National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, 2016), the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Referendum Council, 2017) and the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous peoples' rights in education (Morgan et al., 1999, 2006) advocate, Indigenous voice needs to be heard.

The international human rights charter that the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous peoples' rights in education (Morgan et al., 1999, 2006) draws on that speaks explicitly about Indigenous peoples is the then draft of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP] (United



Nations General Assembly, 2008). It hones in on Articles 3 and 4 of the UNDRIP that addresses some of the stated limitations of previous policy. As the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous peoples' rights in education is explicitly concerned with addressing the rights of Indigenous peoples in education, they also devote time to Articles 14 and 15 that are explicitly related to education.

In the Australian context, the current social conditions and the divisive environment that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are subjected to on a daily basis acts to silence their voices. The capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to contribute is questioned. Indigenous peoples' understanding of policy is disputed. The recent dismissal of the Uluru Statement from the Heart by Prime Minister Turnbull illustrates how the value of First Nations peoples' contributions is diminished (Turnbull, 2017).

The lived experiences, the knowledges, the values and beliefs maintained and held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about how *they* are positioned and silenced in Australia echo in the widening chasm between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. In education, government speaks of the 'gap' identified in the data and statistics when comparing and contrasting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational attainment to their non-Indigenous counterparts (COAG, 2008). Little wonder there is a 'gap'; when in society, there is an ever widening canyon founded within racist ideologies and separatist notions of a binary construct establishing the superiority of the coloniser and the inferiority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The silences and hidden discourses of Indigenous education policy maintain the preservation of colonial values, biases and taken for granted assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in education and Indigenous education as a whole (Hogarth, 2017a). Government and policy makers privilege and sustain the hegemonic position of the coloniser ensuring that, while policy rhetoric suggests collaboration and consultation, the reality of policy being informed by Indigenous voice is

minimal. The recontextualisation and implementation of Indigenous education policy further looks to position non-Indigenous educators and administrators in position of power.

## **Concluding thoughts**

The Uluru Statement from the Heart's authors assert that "in 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard" (Referendum Council, 2017, p. 1). The need for change is now. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be more vocal and 'stand on toes'. We need to unite in our concerns for our children's futures; demanding a position at the table.

However, it won't be easy. While the call for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice within "decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation" is written within Indigenous education policy, the reality is that the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in education is dictated and dependent on the disposition of the dominant White administrators (Education Council, 2015, p. 3). As Johnson, Cherednichenko and Rose (2016) found within their report, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are underrepresented. The roles and responsibilities of the majority of Indigenous educators are as classroom teachers and not in positions of power to speak into the space of school strategy and operation.

We need to be more assertive. The international human rights charters and conventions articulate our rights in education. We need to base our actions in these texts. We need to privilege the agency afforded to us in these texts – our children; our future is dependent on it.

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