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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Gonski 2.0, Melitta Hogarth

October.8.2018

# Words matter: how the latest school funding report (Gonski 2.0) gets it so wrong

By Melitta Hogarth

Much has been said about David Gonski's second review of school funding in Australia. It is a document made up 46,327 words aimed at advising the Australian Government on how school funding can be used to improve student achievement and school performance.

Within those 46,327 words in the 150-page document, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, the term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is only used 10 times. This is less than 0.1% of the total focus within the entire document.

## Deficit discourse

It gets worse. When reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is used in the document, it is predominantly based on 'deficit discourse', that is discussion that represents people or groups in terms of deficiency, absence, lack or failure. And it sets up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to be considered different to the dominant norm. For example:

*"This holds regardless of a student's circumstances, whether they are students with disability, students in rural or remote locations, **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, low socio-economic backgrounds, gifted and talented students, or any combination of these" (p. x, emphasis added);*

*"The review Panel heard from a range of stakeholders that there are common fundamentals needed to support all students – those in capital cities and territories, those in rural or remote locations, students with disability, **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, gifted and talented students, academically advanced or less-advanced students, or any combination of these" (p. 4, emphasis added); and*

*"The strategy seeks to lift students' foundational skills in STEM learning areas, improve Australia's STEM performance in international comparative assessments, reverse the declining number of skilled graduates in STEM-related subjects, and address the under-representation in STEM of girls, of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, **of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**, and of students from non-metropolitan areas (p. 37, emphasis added).*

By consistently listing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander uniqueness as a deficit, it maintains the dominant norm and perpetuates stereotypes. The use of "or any combination of these" is also an interesting clause. It seems a blasé term of reference acting to minimise the varying forms of inequity that peoples face and in turn, dismisses the lack of focus on addressing inequity.

## Representation

Another mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the report includes an explicit mention of the need to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher representation. As I see it, this limits the expectations of Indigenous peoples. They are seen as teachers not also as principals or educational leaders.

In the same way the document lacks promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within educational decision-making, even though this is advocated within numerous current policies. Instead, the reasoning given for increasing representation is that "it promotes student creativity, motivation, deeper learning and problem-solving skills" (p. 73).

The reasoning seems very lack lustre when considering that an entire chapter within the document is focused on "Creating, supporting and valuing a profession of expert educators" (Chapter 3 pp. 56-81). This chapter draws on the work of Professors Jo Lampert and Bruce Burnett and their project, [National Exceptional Teaching in Disadvantaged Schools program](#) which seeks to address disadvantage by seeking exceptional pre-service teachers to fill 'hard to place' schools' staffing issues. Little mention is made of the clientele of these schools or the reason for the schools being deemed 'hard to place' except for a mention of low socio-economic status schools.

### **Missed opportunities for positive acknowledgement**

Yet, aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational research is used to emphasise the importance of classroom teachers and their role in education as well as the involvement of parents and community within the classroom setting. For example, the [Families as First teachers program](#) is mentioned to illustrate the important role of parents supporting cognitive development. This program grew from a [project within Kuranda](#) to build parents capacity to assist their children in early childhood.

The omission of recognition of this being an Indigenous-led project now adapted within schools nationally, further silences the achievements and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Further to this, the notion of mentoring is also discussed. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not explicitly mentioned, the [Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students](#) report (OECD, 2017) was used as the substantiating evidence for mentoring.

The needs based funding loading specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is omitted from the actual report but needs based funding is championed as "levelling the playing field" (p.6).

The Review Panel was established "to examine evidence and make recommendations on how school funding should be used to improve school performance and student outcomes", so these omissions are interesting.

### **One mention only of Cross-Curriculum Priorities**

There are three cross curriculum priorities of the Australian National Curriculum. These are: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and Sustainability. The cross curriculum priorities are part of the national curriculum, which is made up of three dimensions: specific disciplinary knowledge (such as English, science, maths), general capabilities (such as creative thinking, social and emotional skills) and the three cross curriculum priorities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia and Sustainability).

Mention of the cross curriculum priorities is limited to one occasion within the report. And on that one occasion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is omitted. That is, when describing the Australian Curriculum, the report states,

*"The Australian Curriculum can be depicted as a cube of three dimensions: disciplinary knowledge, skills and understanding in learning areas such as English, mathematics and science; general capabilities such as personal and social capability; and cross-curriculum priorities such as Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia" (p. 38).*

### **Why the omission?**

I believe the omission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures may have been intentional. Previous reviews and reports commissioned by the Liberal Government by the likes of Kevin Donnelly have argued (paywalled) that the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures within the curriculum is "hostile towards the institutions, beliefs and grand narrative associated with Western civilisation that makes this nation unique".

So is the omission purposeful; to align with the Liberal agenda of shifting focus? At least the inclusion of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia as the lone cross-curriculum priority is interesting. Considering the Liberal's stance on climate change it is probably not surprising that Sustainability, the other cross-curriculum priority is also omitted.

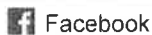
In its defence, the report does acknowledge the numerous reviews undertaken addressing rural and remote education and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and that it "has sought to complement them, rather than go over the same ground. [Stating that,] our specific focus has been on improving school education outcomes for all students across Australia" (p. 14).

However if the review panel's focus was on improving student outcomes and school performance, how can the needs of specific groups that are identified within governmental data sets as struggling to meet national minimum standards be so readily dismissed and silenced?



*Melitta Hogarth is a Kamilaroi woman who is also the Indigenous Education Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland within the College for Indigenous Studies, Education and Research. Prior to entering academia, Melitta taught for almost 20 years in all three sectors of the Queensland education system specifically in Secondary education. Melitta's interests are in education, equity and social justice. She recently completed her PhD titled "Addressing the rights of Indigenous peoples in education: A critical analysis of Indigenous education policy".*

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## 4 thoughts on "Words matter: how the latest school funding report (Gonski 2.0) gets it so wrong"



**Cindy Valdez-Adams**

October 8, 2018 at 2:46 pm

Thank you for this article. I agree. I would love to count the number of times they've made reference to "students from non-English speaking backgrounds" and students from a refugee v-background. And by the way, no one ever says "non-English" speaking backgrounds as that does imply a 'deficit' view to speaking other languages. We've moved onto "Language background Other Than English" (LBOTE), and English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D). I'm always interested in these reviews, and often wondered if they speak to the humble teachers who are on the ground. I, for one, have never heard from the Gonski team, given that our school has the most number of refugee students in the Primary school sector in NSW.



**Melitta Hogarth**

October 9, 2018 at 10:28 am





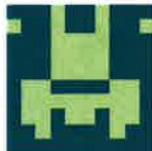
Hi Cindy and thank you for engaging with my piece. Yes, we could write the same piece for any of the listed minority groups and come up with a similar story. Unfortunately, the dominant norm is persistent and powerful and is able to speak in many spaces with presumed authority. The play with language to comfort and perpetuate the dominant norm is strong. Hopefully our voices will be heard while we chip away providing an alternative lens



**Sue Burvill-Shaw**

October 15, 2018 at 4:20 pm

Thanks for this passionate and well argued blog, Mellita! You are so right that words shape perceptions! Every teacher needs to understand that working from a deficit model will not develop growth mindsets and positive goals. We must all chip away at norms which restrict student equity. Thank you.



**Melitta Hogarth**

October 15, 2018 at 5:32 pm

Hi Sue

Most definitely – if we begin with a deficit model, then we are subconsciously setting low expectations and nothing good ever comes of that.

And yes, It is important to constantly push the buttons and challenge what is perceived as the norm; to remind people and policymakers that the homogenised groups within the labels used, are indeed people whose ambitions and goals are often hindered or silenced by what I would hope is simply the ignorance of the Other rather than the more sinister notion – rhetoric to appear to address the "social issues" without the intent to improve the situation and maintain power/privilege.

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