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The trickery used to marginalise and silence Indigenous voice in education

By Melitta Hogarth

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. However, actions and evidence suggest otherwise: the silencing and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples continues. My research focuses on the various mechanisms put in place that counter the goodwill intentions shared by policy makers and politicians, specifically in Indigenous education policy. I believe there is trickery at play. There is allusion to the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but it is not really happening.

The good intentions of politicians

Quite often the will and want to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is foregrounded in [political speeches and/or reports from Prime Ministers](#). Here, we find assertions from people in positions of political authority who say they want to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. For example, International human rights charters such as [the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous voices. The political elite continually refer to these rights and say they espouse such desires.

What is really happening politically

In the lead up to the 2016 election, the National Congress of Australia's First Nations Peoples released the [Redfern Statement: An urgent call for a more just approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs](#). Here, the Congress highlighted the lack of Indigenous representation at a national level where decision-making and policy about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is made. By 2017 and with the release of the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#), the call for Indigenous voices to be heard was made. However, the instant dismissal of the Uluru Statement of the Heart acted to silence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and contradicted the sentiments shared by politicians and Prime Ministers elsewhere within the public arena.

The good intentions of education policy

Within the [Australian Curriculum](#) and more specifically, its [cross curriculum priority](#), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, there is opportunity for these cultural gaps to be redressed. There is space to allow for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be engaged in and with the teaching and learning offered in schools.

It requires schools, principals and educators to build partnerships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. This is not a new innovation. Since the [initial reports regarding Indigenous education](#), there has been a call to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures into teaching and learning.

What is really happening in education

However, policy and therefore, policy makers ignore the premises of a partnership where relationships need to be nurtured to be maintained; where trust needs to be built. This can't happen when the schooling systems engaged in educating many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children usually work on three-year cycles, whereby teachers and principals transition in and out of community.

Further assumptions are located within the current Indigenous education policy, the [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015](#), where the lack of Indigenous representation within the Australian teaching workforce is also ignored. Indigenous people have no power or real influence on what is and is not taught in schools or more importantly, what is deemed necessary and what is not. In what has already been described in many papers as a [content heavy curriculum](#) and [ignored in recent reviews and reports](#), the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures can easily be seen as 'bolted on' and ignored.

My experience as an Aboriginal teacher

I was a classroom teacher for almost 20 years with my final years being within schools with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student populations. As the only Aboriginal teacher within these schooling environments, my colleagues and the principals often called on me to be the mediator between the schools and the communities.

I was torn. My role as classroom teacher was seen by the school as a means to communicate with communities about the school's expectations and yet, the community saw my role and position as a means to speak into the school space. The tug of war minimised my own voice. The schools and the principals failed to see what was happening and did not attempt to build relationships with the communities because they simply relied on me to be the go-between for them. This essentially, widened the gap between the school and the community. In turn, this made Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice within the planning and decision making almost an impossibility. Due to the actions (or should that be inaction?), the school had silenced the community.

Let's flip the system

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to indeed have a voice in the decision making that effects them, there is a need to flip the system and to transform the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are viewed by wider Australia. That is, Australia needs to acknowledge the biases and assumptions held within colonial Australia and allow for truth telling and conciliation of the past. This begins through education.

As Indigenous peoples we need to be more assertive. We need to harness the international human rights charters and use them to privilege our voices. We need to speak into policymaking on Indigenous Affairs and call out politicians for their empty rhetoric. We need to have more of a say in what is taught within schools. Our children are dependent on it. Our future is dependent on it.



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". She can be

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Melitta is presenting on her research at the [2018 AARE Conference](#). On Monday 3rd December at 4pm she is presenting on 'Musings of an aboriginal researcher' and is chairing a Symposium on Wednesday 5th December on 'Education research that engages with multiple voices: Flipping the Australian education system'.

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