

A dream of a culturally responsive classroom

The United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP]¹ asserts the right to self-determination. The draft UNDRIP faced criticisms of Articles 3 and 4 and its call for self-determination which ultimately led to all four British colonial states – Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States – voting against the UNDRIP in 2007². The UNDRIP has become a vehicle in which Indigenous peoples can speak back to the settler state and therefore, Article 14 of the UNDRIP is particularly important to consider as an Indigenous education academic as it speaks to Indigenous peoples right to education and establishing their own educational systems. It is Article 14 which acts as the provocation for this paper.

“Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”³.

Such a statement has often been interpreted as a precursor to the notion of decolonising, or what is more favoured here in colonial Australia – indigenising, schools. However, as Tuck and Wang argue, decolonisation is fraught with complexities⁴. The notion of decolonisation has the potential to continue and maintain the process of colonisation under the guise of addressing White fragility. And then the question needs to be asked – what does a decolonised education system look like? How can schools and its curriculum be decolonised when funding is dependent on the enactment of the Australian Curriculum and reporting to Western standards? With that in mind, how can Indigenous peoples establish their educational systems? Is this why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are still seen as ‘bolted on’ rather than ‘built in’ to the education system as it is?

Governments talk big and you would be forgiven to think that there has been a shift in political rhetoric in recent years. Prime Ministers have espoused to make a “commitment that [...] Government would do things with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, not do things to them”⁵ which has most recently been translated to the formation of the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations [the Coalition of Peaks] to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in decision-making⁶. The Coalition of Peaks is made up of various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Bodies both Federal and State. However, it is noted that within the almost 40 governance bodies that make up the Coalition of Peaks, only two of these are explicitly working in the field of education. It is difficult to see how education is a focus when there is so little representation in this key governance body.

Unfortunately, underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the education space is evident throughout. The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher

¹(United Nations General Assembly, 2008)

²(Ferreira, 2013)

³(United Nations General Assembly, 2008, p. 7)

⁴(Tuck & Yang, 2012)

⁵(Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017, p. 4)

⁶(NACCHO, 2019)

Initiative (MATSISTI) project worked to increase the Indigenous teacher workforce in education⁷. By 2015, there were 3,100 classroom teachers who identified as Indigenous amongst a teacher workforce that totalled almost 280,000 fulltime teacher workforce population. The lack of representation within schools establishes an imbalance that allows for the White settler ideologies and knowledges to be maintained and championed. Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students making up over 5% of the total student population within colonial Australian schools, it was not until the introduction of the Australian Curriculum that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures were included into classrooms⁸.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] further acts to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a deficit and perpetuates the notion of failure⁹. It is often ignored that Indigenous students were excluded from the classroom up until the mid 1970s and that schooling was purposefully used within colonial Australia to ‘civilise’ Indigenous youth¹⁰. The trauma experienced within the schooling system is perpetuated with the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledges, implicit and explicit racism and the privileging of Western ways of knowing. One need only review the yearly Closing the Gap Prime Minister Reports’ to see how little progress is being achieved in addressing the inequities prevalent in the Western schooling system¹¹.

So where from here? How can these issues be addressed? The Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous peoples’ rights in education¹² provides principles to be embedded within educational systems that are supported by international charters and conventions. The production of this document was a slow process that involved several consultations with Indigenous peoples around the world over several years. The resulting principles centre the right to be Indigenous and the right to self-determination.

I dream of an education system that privileges and centres Indigenous knowledges; of a space where Indigenous peoples are respected and encouraged to share their alternative worldviews to counter the White settler narratives. I dream of an education system that Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing are just the way things are done and not seen as a novelty event within the already crowded curriculum. I dream of an education system whereby the Indigenous student is not instantly branded with a deficit sticker and teachers hold low expectations but moreover, a classroom where opportunities for Indigenous kids to shine and be the teacher is ever present. Such a school space is not possible without the increase of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all levels of decision-making but more importantly, the increase of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators who have knowledge and experience working within the education space. Such a school space is not possible if the ‘measuring stick’ of success is bound within your understandings of the White settler state and their knowledges, a privileging of Standard Australian English as the only means of communication despite the multiliteracies present in the Indigenous

⁷ (Johnson, Cherednichenko, & Rose, 2016)

⁸ (ACARA, 2015)

⁹ (ACARA, 2013)

¹⁰ (Beresford, 2012)

¹¹ (See, for example: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017)

¹² (Morgan et al., 2006)

child¹³. Such a school space necessitates the classroom teacher to use culturally responsive pedagogies that takes a holistic view of the student; recognising and valuing the differences they bring to the classroom setting. A day when this is observable in schools in a day that we as classroom teachers and educators can truly say we are working to promote reconciliation. It is a day that I hope I can see in my lifetime.

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¹³ (Hogarth, 2019)



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