

Nathan Towney, Pro-Vice Chancellor Indigenous Strategy and Leadership

Imagine an education system or institution where all staff, students and graduates understand the role they could play in improving life outcomes for marginalised groups. Shouldn't this be the goal of every University, as they take up the responsibility of educating future policy developers, influencers and implementers?

Recent world events have highlighted the structural discrimination and disadvantage still experienced by marginalised groups, particularly people of colour. Australia is no different. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and communities have been negatively impacted since the time of invasion. The British brought many things to Australia, including ideologies. Bruce Pascoe (2014) outlines how the first colonists were wrought by ideas that their way of life was superior and it was their duty to spread their version of civilisation. Colonial beliefs and commitments have influenced many government policies and structures, creating an endemic cultural bias. These processes of colonisation also dictate what is deemed as important in education settings across the Western world. As Paulo Friere states:

“education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (1968, p.16).

Based on this premise, the Australian education system has been used as a vehicle to attempt to have all students conform to a particular way of thinking, knowing and being, showing a complete disregard for cultural difference. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were thrown into a system that did not make sense to their way of life. The system was attempting to teach knowledge and skills that had no relevance in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Egger, Stevens, Binns and Morgan argue that this systemic approach has resulted in a ‘lack of meaning, alienation and loss of culture’ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia (2019).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) life expectancy at birth of Indigenous men was 8.6 years lower than for non-Indigenous men, while Indigenous women were 7.8 years lower than that of non-Indigenous women. Indigenous people accounted for over a quarter (28%) of the total adult prison population and over half (53%) of the juvenile detention population. In 2018, the national attendance rate for Indigenous students was 11 % lower than non-Indigenous students (Closing the Gap report, 2019). Indigenous student's achievement across all areas of NAPLAN remain well below the achievements of non-Indigenous students (Closing the Gap report 2019).

The current system is not working. So what needs to happen to ensure the inequities are acknowledged and the people of power take an approach that is effective and sustainable?

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019, p. 2) states that education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society, and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (2015, p. 2) outlines a vision that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity as Australia's First Nations peoples.

A strategic approach is essential in bringing these aspirations to life. An approach that is courageous and dismantles the current structures.

Building the cultural capacity of all staff delivering education would be an important first step. If staff have knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures it allows opportunities for cultural bias to be visible and challenged. It opens educators up to a new way of thinking, being and doing.

To genuinely build the cultural capacity of staff, local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be involved. This creates opportunities for staff to learn, form sustainable relationships and where appropriate engage this local knowledge into education. In turn, the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community feel empowered and have opportunities for their knowledge and expertise to be valued, where historically this has not been the case.

An education institution where all staff, students and graduates learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures is possible. When these practices are sustained and valued as much as other knowledge systems, true partnerships will promote respect and improved life outcomes.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) Data*. Accessed via: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4715.0main+features12018-19>
- Australian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet. (2019). *Closing the Gap Report 2019: The annual report to parliament on progress in Closing the Gap*. Accessed via: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/reports/closing-the-gap-2019/sites/default/files/ctg-report-20193872.pdf?a=1>
- Berry, Y., Tehan, D., Mitchell, S., Uibo, S., Grace, G., Gardner, J., Rockliff, J., Merlino, J., Ellery, S. (2019). *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. Education Council. Accessed via: <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>.
- Education Council. (2015). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015*. Education Council. Accessed via: https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/natsi_educationstrategy_v3.pdf
- Egger, G., Stevens, J., Binns, A., Morgan, B. (2019). *Psychosocial Determinants of Chronic Disease: Implications for Lifestyle Medicine*. American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine 2019. DOI: 10.1177/1559827619845335
- Freire, P. (1968). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum
- Pascoe, B. (2014). *Dark Emu*. Broome: Magabala Books

To cite this paper: Toney, N. (2020). Opening up new ways of thinking, doing and being. Burke, P.J., Bunn, M., Lumb, M. (Eds). *An invitation to reconceptualise Widening Participation through praxis*. Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education resource. Available at: <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/>.