From rhetoric to learning: Bridging the disconnect between policy and teaching practice around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in the Australian primary education system

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Abstract: This paper will examine the need for strengthening the support mechanisms for learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in the Australian primary education system to support the implementation of existing education policies. While there is currently strong rhetorical commitment through educational policies and related supporting documents, these do not provide sufficient practical support of—or enable teachers to effectively teach—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content or perspectives. It is essential that we recognise and address the obstacles that teachers must overcome in practice. Specifically, enhanced support to source appropriate high quality resources could help to address many of the issues encountered in the process of transforming educational policy to teaching practice.

Keywords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; primary education; teaching policy and practice.

In order to reimagine Australia as a nation that acknowledges, values and respects its First Nations Peoples, First Nations perspectives, First Nations cultures and First Nations histories, and even embraces and celebrates these as fundamental parts of our national identity and national story, it is essential to first reimagine our education system, starting from primary education. Every Australian state and territory has policies and other supporting documents and resources that claim to facilitate learning about Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Australia in the primary education system. In practice, however, realising these policies in classrooms is significantly more challenging due to a variety of complex and often interrelated issues. In this paper, I will examine some of these obstacles and discuss options for overcoming them and strengthening the link between policy and practice. I will firstly summarise the rhetorical commitment that already exists in the form of a wide variety of policies. I will then look at how these are disconnected from the lived realities of Australian primary school classrooms. Finally, I will discuss how this disconnect can be partially addressed through the provision of better access to appropriate and high quality resources.

An overview of relevant educational policies

Starting from an international policy perspective, there are three major rights-based international documents that support and encourage the role of learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in primary schools. Looking at Universal Human Rights (UN 1948), Article 26 Section 2 states:

> Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.

Similarly, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989), Article 29 affirms that it is the responsibility of governments to ensure that the education of all children develops the respect for the child's

> … own cultural identity, language and values … in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN 2007) Article 13 asserts:

> Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and States shall take effective measures to ensure this right is protected.

Further, Article 15 of the same document (UN 2007) confirms governments shall take

> … effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.

Even through a broad international policy lens, Australia has already committed to providing each and every child and person in Australia with an education that promotes understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and specifically and

effectively works towards protecting the rights of Indigenous Australian children to use and revitalise their languages, histories and traditions, and pass them on to future generations.

Narrowing the focus slightly to national policies, the best known national education policy is the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's Australian Curriculum (ACARA 2016), which is currently being rolled out around Australia. One of the major relevant achievements in this area of policy is ACARA's selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a cross-curriculum priority. Until recently, however, the cross-curriculum priority consisted of just one and half pages of original content that related specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the 1,846-page curriculum document (ACARA 2015b). These one and a half pages include three paragraphs, which were repeated throughout the curriculum content areas, slightly rephrased in each, as well as a diagram and nine general "Organising Ideas." In the current Australian Curriculum Version 8.3 (ACARA 2016), greater detail has been added throughout the content areas, including many "elaborations," possible learning outcomes and suggestions on lesson content.

ACARA also recently released the Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (ACARA 2015a). This is a significant milestone for all those who have worked for the recognition of the important role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages have not only in Australia but in the world. These languages represent the most organic way to express some of the oldest living cultural concepts, and as Roberta Sykes (1989, p. 13) observed:

> … if every migrant language in Australia stopped being spoken here the language would continue to survive in the country of origin. The only languages which would disappear completely off the face of the globe without support and attention are the Indigenous languages. This is even more poignant if we understand that every group's entire history of experience with life, law, nature and culture is contained in their language, and that each group develops its own unique concepts of their perception of the world and these concepts can often only be expressed in that language …

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008) was made by all Australian Education Ministers in 2008 and is still used as a guiding policy document in some states. The two main goals in this document are: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. This could be perceived as problematic because the document discusses these goals in a way that would require the societal challenges and learners themselves to change to achieve the goals. Alternatively, this document could recognise the need for the education system to make changes, such as providing stronger support for teaching a more holistic curriculum, encompassing Indigenous knowledges, languages and histories. This could then enable students to connect more genuinely with the curriculum, which could, in turn, produce better and more tangible results in relation to the stated goals.

Building on the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians, and other similar documents from the last three decades, the National Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander Education Strategy (Education Council 2015) was released in 2015. This document outlines a number of key principles that should underpin the approach of all education systems. These include, but are not limited to: cultural recognition, which refers to the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories, values, languages and cultures to be acknowledged and respected; relationships, which refers to the need for meaningful relationships that value community cultural knowledge, wisdom and expertise, and demonstrate trust and respect; and partnerships, which refers to the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be engaged in decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation of early childhood, schooling and higher education services at local, sector and national levels. Thus, each of these principles sets out a series of tasks that could equate to a full-time job in themselves, which teachers must engage with individually. The cultural recognition principle requires teachers to develop and maintain sufficient knowledge of the diverse histories, values, languages and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be able to acknowledge them adequately and respectfully. However, this idea of acknowledging them and respecting them is very open to interpretation and could be implemented in a wide variety of ways. The relationships principle requires teachers to know *who* to engage with to create meaningful relationships. Further to this, the partnership principle requires teachers to know who to engage with to adequately and appropriately represent "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" in the decision making, planning, delivery and evaluation of all levels of education.

Within the Australian Professional Standard for Teachers (AITSL 2014), Standard 2.4 outlines the need for teachers to understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Standard 1.4 also requires teachers to be able to apply their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and identities to enhance the education and teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In practice, therefore, these national policies require individual teachers to interpret how the cross-curriculum priority could be and should be taught, while knowing how to approach reconciliation effectively, and navigate multiple cultural knowledge systems with appropriate respect.

Shifting attention now to state-based policies, these policies will not be discussed in as much individual detail, as Australia is currently moving towards a nationalised system. However, as education in Australia remains primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments, it is valuable to understand the existing policies.

Firstly, the Australian Capital Territory's Every Chance to Learn curriculum (ACT Education Directorate 2007), which preceded the Australian Curriculum currently rolled out, only committed to very limited and generalised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lesson content.

In contrast, the Government of New South Wales provides more specific policies, including, for example, the Turning Policy into Action (NSW DEC 2008) document, which supports the implementation of the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy. This document mandates Aboriginal cultural education through professional learning and career development experiences for all staff, and under the Local Schools, Local

Decisions reform, this responsibility lies with the individual schools. The "Together we are, together we can, together we will" Partnership Agreement (NSW DEC, NSW AECG and AETD 2009) with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group advocates for a close working relationship between schools and their local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group to enable the effective implementation of the Connecting to Country program, as well as other classroom-based learning. Importantly, the Partnership Agreement also provides a very useful and necessary conduit between active teachers and Aboriginal peoples and communities.

With regards to the Northern Territory, where there is a larger percentage of Aboriginal students than anywhere else in Australia (ABS 2011), it is significant to examine the role that Aboriginal languages have played in education over time. The first school to offer instruction in both English and an Aboriginal language was Ntaria (or Hermannsburg), which taught in Western Aranda from around 1896 (ABC 2009). This, however, did not get discussed at a policy level of bilingual education until the 1960s and did not get officially implemented until the 1970s (ibid). The momentum around this grew into the 1990s, until it hit some speed bumps as bilingual education was scapegoated for lower overall student performance in remote communities (ibid). In more recent years, a "two-way learning" or "both ways learning" approach has gained popularity, in both policy and practice, at all levels of education (McConaughy and Nakata 2000, p. 11; Ober and Bat 2007; Yipirinya School 2017).

On their website, the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority provides some very practical guidelines for how to best embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, including an explanation of "outsider v. insider" information in the Sharing Knowledge about Sacred Sites and Ceremonies document; some general ideas on how to combat racism in schools; advice on how to engage and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guest speakers; and importantly, how to choose quality resources to support lesson plans (QCAA 2015). Unfortunately, some of the resources referenced in this material are considerably dated, but without more contemporary alternatives, they still make a necessary contribution to the resource pool. In addition to these, the website provides access to other protocols, resources and readings.

South Australia's Department of Education and Child Development's webpage (DECD n.d.) links directly to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures Cross Curriculum Priority (ACARA 2016), and to the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR 2009), referring to its advocacy for the practice of Cultural Competence. Other than these documents, the South Australian Certificate of Education Board has an Aboriginal Education Strategy 2017-2021 (SACE Board 2017), which claims to build on the success of the previous Strategy, but this is targeted at preparing Aboriginal students to undertake and achieve their senior secondary qualification in South Australia. It does not address content or primary education. Thus, there is limited guidance for teachers in South Australia relating to teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in the primary education system, without practical advice on how to bring the policies into classroom teaching.

Tasmania's Aboriginal Education Framework 2016-2017 (Department of Education Tasmania 2016) is succinct but comprehensive, covering both Aboriginal student education outcomes and Aboriginal content learning outcomes. Tasmania's Aboriginal

Education Services page (Department of Education n.d.) supports this framework through the provision of a number of programs, which are listed on the webpage and available through the service, as well as a series of practical and instructional video resources.

The Victorian Aboriginal Languages Curriculum (VCAA 2016) and the Aboriginal Languages and Cultures micro-site (VCAA 2017) explain how to start an Aboriginal language class in schools, which protocols should be followed, and what resources and links are available to support these classes.

Western Australia's Aboriginal Education webpage (DoE 2016) provides resources to support the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum, with lesson plans, teaching resources and mind maps.

Policy v. practice disconnect

From a policy perspective therefore, it is apparent that the governments of Australia are willing to commit to enhancing teaching and learning around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. The challenge is to connect this to teaching practice, move beyond rhetoric, and enable these policies to be create learning in every primary school classroom around Australia. To achieve this, it is essential to recognise and overcome some of the practical challenges experienced by teachers. These include, but are not limited to, graduate teacher knowledge and the limitations of initial teacher training; a lack of experience and expertise specifically in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and perspectives; the time restraints that teachers face, which limits their ability to research and design lesson plans around what is often unfamiliar content for them; the difficulty associated with finding and vetting appropriate and high quality resources; the challenge of negotiating the line around what can and should be shared; and understanding and addressing one's own values and experiences and the way these impact teaching practices.

Mayer and her colleagues (2017) have recently published a longitudinal study into the effectiveness of initial teacher education. The research showed that the introduction of the Australian Curriculum changed the way teachers were teaching (Mayer et al. 2017, p. 72), and a couple of the key areas for potential improvement of initial teacher training was "more engagement with school curriculum and content" and "more focus on non-teaching issues related to teachers' work beyond the classroom" including professional engagement with parents/carers and the community (Mayer et al. 2017, p. 92). Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk and Robinson (2012, pp. 6-9) compiled a report aimed at improving teaching for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, and found that initial teacher training should better address the need for parent and community involvement in educating teachers and participating in school life generally. This is especially important in relation to learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia because teachers should engage the school's community in this learning process. International discourse (including Zeichner and Conklin 2016) highlights a narrative of teacher education failure, but I would argue that the Australian system needs to be reimagined to help prospective teachers navigate and engage with a lifelong learning practice. Mayer et al. (2017, p. 129) argue there is a need to shift the focus away from

"classroom readiness," and instead recognise teacher training as an ongoing process. This process should be

> a cumulative program of connected multi-disciplinary and multi-focused work in teacher education that concerns itself with issues of practice and policy, curriculum and pedagogy across the continuum of preparatory, transitional, and continuing teacher education, and involves both universities and the profession. (Green 2009 cited in Mayer et al. 2017, p. 127)

Teachers have usually only completed limited "Indigenous Education" training, and this can encompass both pedagogy specifically for the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and perspectives (e.g. Craven 2011; Harrison 2011). This type of core unit is often taught within the first year of the degree (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012, p. 6) and as such, it often does not involve sufficient analytical or skill-building components to enable teachers to source and maintain appropriate and relevant resources to enable their effective teaching. Generally these core courses have been found to have a greater impact on a teacher's self-confidence and feeling of competence, than on their enjoyment of or ability to effectively teach Aboriginal Studies (Craven et al. 2003 cited in Moreton Robinson et al. 2012, p. 7). Many early career teachers are not comfortable or confident teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in a "meaningful, relevant and respectful" way (Gilbert 2015), and do not fully understand or relate to them (Harrison 2011, pp. 17-18).

> This raises a complicated question: is ignorance a good enough reason to have made errors or omissions in teaching Indigenous Studies? This is a difficult issue too because sometimes teachers argue that in their fear of saying the wrong thing, they will decide not to touch Indigenous issues in their classrooms at all. (Lampert and Lilley 1996 cited in Lampert 2005, p. 89)

The insufficient studies at university and lack of opportunities for in-service professional development are often used to explain teachers feeling inadequately prepared (Rotary 2015, p. 58). Gilbert (2015) argues professional development is essential to overcoming this challenge. Ma Rhea, Anderson and Atkinson (2012) highlight the need for more culturally responsive teaching and emphasise the potential impact of professional development with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus for teachers on the quality and truth of their teachings. Alternatively, Mundine (quoted in Wiltshire and Donnelly 2014, p. 101) suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning, as a discrete course, should be delivered by specialist teachers specifically "qualified to teach in this domain."

Time restraints are another practical challenge that teachers must address, and this can be compounded by the need to research and design lesson plans around potentially unfamiliar content, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

> For any set of curriculum materials, it is necessary for a teacher to select from available materials and teaching strategies and alter and creatively combine them to produce an engaging and effective educational experience for their particular students … . (Rotary 2015, p. 5)

Teachers are required to work broad curriculum ideas into specific lesson, assessment and reporting plans. As summarised above, there is a wide range of policies and supporting documents that should guide the teaching and learning of content and perspectives around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, but these can be difficult to locate and apply to one's teaching practice. Even where more specific suggestions are now available in the curriculum (ACARA 2016), teachers are still required to have sufficient local knowledge to be able to incorporate the recommendations to their practice. Unless additional practical support is provided, this is likely to result in a tokenistic reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to tick the cross-curriculum priority box (Williamson and Dalal 2007).

Furthermore, the difficulty associated with finding and vetting appropriate and high quality resources that are endorsed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should not be underestimated. There are some general texts available (e.g. Craven 2012; Harrison 2011), but Ghillar Michael Anderson (NSW AECG 2015) warns that printed resources should be read with caution because "when you come from a secret society, you don't tell your secrets." Working within and around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures respectfully is a significant challenge for many people, including teachers specifically (e.g. Carlson et al. 2014). Thus, Nakata (2011, pp. 1-8) argues that when resources are so difficult to locate and filter for quality, greater guidance is needed around how to improve understanding and the valuing of differences, while encouraging genuine engagement with the cross-curriculum priority.

Teachers must also be relatively familiar with Indigenous knowledges and knowledge systems, in order to successfully and respectfully negotiate the line around what can and should be shared. "[A]ppropriate levels of knowledge, attitudes and enthusiasm is critical to the success of teaching about Indigenous history, culture and issues" (Rotary 2015, p. 5). For example, some information, also referred to as Insider Knowledge, should never be shared with outsiders (QCAA 2008), while other information can only be shared with permission from the knowledge holders and/or a particular place. Knowing who can make decisions around Indigenous knowledges is central to engaging with these knowledge systems respectfully. Understanding this, and knowing who to ask, is another challenge teachers are often faced with. Mackinlay and Barney (2014, p. 32) note

> … educators are being asked to localise, enter into relationships with and make space for Indigenous Australian people as holders of knowledge that is valid, legitimate and relevant for all Australians.

In addition to this, it is important to understand the role that an individual teacher's values and identity can play in the classroom, and how these issues can have tangible effects within educational settings in Australia (Miller, Dunn and Currell 2005, pp. 60-79; Vass 2012). Even teachers who believe in "Indigenous justice" may not know how to enact that in their classrooms (Lampert 2005, p. 87), or may not recognise the impact of race, whiteness, othering and racialisation on education, curriculum and teaching (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012, p. 9). Without actively reflecting on one's position in and exposure to a racialised education system, there is a significant danger that teachers will perhaps inadvertently and unconsciously reproduce the inequity and injustice through their teachings. Simply understanding the values and histories of the constructs of education

and schooling can help to give perspective to this process (see Martin 2005, pp. 37-38). Vigilante (2007 cited in Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012, p. 10) argues for two essential goals in effective anti-racism education: curricular justice, and the wider responsibility of redressing the social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people. As an example, a belief in an essentialist notion of Aboriginality may not only result in a failure to recognise and therefore teach the diversity among Indigenous peoples, but also potentially "reinforce the racism of the dominant culture and contribute to stereotypes about who is a 'real' Aborigine" (Taylor 1999, p. 44). Thus, understanding and empathising with the personal lives of your students and their cultures, while reflecting on and recognising the role of your own values and practices as an aspirant teacher, or as a practicing teacher in the classroom, can help to improve the outcomes for students (Gower and Byrne 2012, p. 380) and the quality of your teaching.

Sourcing resources to support better teaching practice

There are some isolated examples of local initiatives that have made progress towards bridging the gap between the numerous education policies and improved teaching practice. These include the work of Tasmania's Aboriginal Education Services, and a Rotary joint project, which provided curriculum resources and professional development for secondary school teachers on Wadjak Noongar history, culture and issues. These initiatives have already produced positive outcomes in the area of teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia by providing resources to address the challenges highlighted above. Although current outcomes have been limited to the local contexts of such initiatives, the promising results suggest that similar initiatives should be trialled more broadly to support the rollout of the Australian Curriculum, and the teaching of the cross-curriculum priority at a primary school level specifically.

The Department of Education Tasmania's Aboriginal Education Services webpage (n.d.) provides the necessary information to understand, contact and/or access their programs, including the Aboriginal Sharers of Knowledge (ASK) program; the Aboriginal Educators in Schools program; Aboriginal History and Culture Videos and Learning Tasks; Aboriginal Education Services—Funding for Schools, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Tours for Schools with an Aboriginal Learning Facilitator; and Bush Kinder at the Sustainability Learning Centre, Mount Nelson, as well as the contact details for the Aboriginal Education Library. The webpage has a simple and easy-to-use interface. The instructional video clips provide lesson ideas with an explanation of how they can be run, how to incorporate other learning objectives, and why the lesson is important. While other webpages may have more information or more resources, the simplicity, accessibility and time-efficient layout of this site makes it a great example of how to support policy in teaching practice. Furthermore, combining this with the Aboriginal Education Services' suite of programs, which provides the human resources to support teaching and learning about Aboriginal Tasmania, this is a strong example of existing resources that could be nationalised to effect positive change in primary school classrooms around Australia.

The Rotary project was a successful joint initiative between the Rotary Clubs of Belmont, Subiaco, West Perth and Western Endeavour, the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council (SWALSC), Murdoch University and the Western Australia Department of

Education (Rotary, 2015). Although its focus was on Year 9 secondary school teaching and learning around Aboriginal history, culture and issues, the lessons learned can and should be applied more broadly to both primary and secondary school contexts. The project addressed the low level of knowledge among Western Australian people relating to Aboriginal history, culture and contemporary issues by developing a set of SWALSC-endorsed ready-made lessons, including supporting materials and films, and providing complimentary professional development for teachers. The Project's Final Report (Rotary 2015, pp. 4-5) lists ten principal recommendations. The majority of the recommendations can and should be applied to wider teaching practice around Australia to support the effective implementation of existing education policies.

> Indigenous individuals and cultural organisations should be involved to the maximum extent practicable in the design and development of curriculum materials, teaching activities (including incursions and excursions), evaluation of teaching programs and training of teachers at university and especially during in-service professional development courses … The development of local and regional cultural material to insert into a generic state- [or nation-] wide curriculum could be productively integrated with [professional development] … for teachers. (Rotary 2015, p. 5)

The final report also recommends that more comprehensive curriculum materials should be provided to teachers in an easy-to-use format: "providing teachers with the skills and tools (and adequate time to [sic] for this task) is critical to the success of the teaching and learning" (Rotary 2015, p. 4).

In conclusion, existing policies are generally supportive of a strong role for teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia in the primary education system. Unfortunately, teachers experience a wide variety of obstacles that prevent a comprehensive engagement with those policies, and their promises, at a classroom level. Accessing appropriate resources, including targeted professional development training and purpose-designed sources, however, could effectively and efficiently bridge the gap between relevant educational policies and teaching practices. Specifically, these resources should include human resources, such as Aboriginal organisations and individuals, and secondary resources, such as documents, websites and video clips, and should cover the local, state and national contexts. A greater level of practical support for teachers is essential to overcome the various barriers and ensure they deliver on the rhetorical commitment given in current educational policies.

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