



Identity matters: Aboriginal educational sovereignty and futurity pushing back on the logic of elimination

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Abstract

This paper situates the context of the *Aboriginal Voices: The state of Aboriginal student experiences in Australian secondary school project* special issue of *The Australian Educational Researcher* in the wider context of First Nations educational research. It outlines the contribution to scholarship that each of the papers within the special issue makes towards developing a more nuanced, research-informed, and deeper understanding about the current state of Aboriginal education in Australia from the voices of those at the coalface. In doing so, this editorial overview highlights that while racism is still rampant across the education sector, and Aboriginal Peoples continue to face deficit discourses about their being and academic capabilities, a new era of sovereign activism is being mobilised by Aboriginal Peoples, and their allies, to drive educational change.

Keywords Indigenous education · First Nations education · Aboriginal voices · Futurity · Sovereignty · Education research

Situating the context

In 2017, a collective of two Aboriginal researchers and twelve non-Indigenous researchers from 10 Australian universities came together to conduct a series of systematic reviews of empirical research published in field of Indigenous education (Guenther et al., 2019; Moodie et al., 2021). The reviews highlighted, yet again, that

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a scant body of research has so often underpinned many State and Federal programs that claim to be designed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. As has been identified, much of this research has either focussed on English literacy, numeracy, and attendance programs and outcomes (Guenther & Osborne, 2020), or research that had little veracity when scaled up for systemwide implementation. Surprisingly and disappointedly, these reviews failed to find evidence of programs that could identify sustained schooling success for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (Guenther et al., 2019).

While the systematic reviews project was in its initial phase in late 2017, the two *Aboriginal Voices* project leads—Kevin Lowe and Cathie Burgess—conducted a simultaneous qualitative, whole-school research project with six schools in New South Wales High Schools to investigate underpinning issues affecting the relationships between schools and Aboriginal community (Lowe et al., 2022). The project sought to provide some understandings to the oft-quoted impacts of deficit discourses on students and to identify practices that resonated with Aboriginal students' educational, cultural, and wellbeing needs and aspirations. While the papers in this special issue will attest that there was unmistakable evidence mistrust and misunderstanding between families of Aboriginal students and many schools within the study, there were glimmers of hope. Optimism for strength-based discourses arose from the voices of students and families who spoke about the enormous benefits that emerged when they were provided opportunities to position themselves within local Aboriginal language and/or cultural programs. Their voices, insights, and experiences spoke to the positive impacts that such programs had on supporting Aboriginal sense of identity, belonging to Country, and connections to First Nations knowledges.

This special issue of the *Australian Educational Researcher* draws on interview and focus group data from Phase 1 of *Aboriginal Voices* project conducted by Lowe and Burgess to build educational scholarship about the state of Aboriginal¹ education in Australia today. The overarching premise of this study has been to shed light on how settler-colonial power/knowledge relations circulate, and govern, Aboriginal students' engagement with Australian schooling, interrogate educational process that work with/against Aboriginal onto-epistemologies and provide provocative standpoints about the future of education for Aboriginal students and studies in Australia.

It is authored by a culturally and professionally diverse team who include: Associate Professor Cathie Burgess as a non-Aboriginal educator who has worked in Aboriginal education for over 35 years; Dr. Aleryk Fricker who is a Dja Dja Wurrung man born in Naarm, Victoria, and works as an Early Career Lecturer in the NIKERI Institute of the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University; Professor Grace Sarra, who is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage from Bindal and Birri clan groups of the Birri gubba Nation and Torres Strait Islander heritage of Mauar,

¹ While we use the nomenclature of First Nations as a common noun to acknowledge the sovereign peoples across the Australian continent and Torres Strait Islands, the common noun of Aboriginal peoples is used throughout this special issue as the work is centralised within New South Wales, and the sovereign peoples of this region refer to themselves as Aboriginal.

Stephen, and Murray Islands, and academic and a researcher within the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology; Professor Jo Lampert, Professor of Social Inclusion and Teacher Education and Director of the NEXUS alternative pathway into teaching at La Trobe University; Associate Professor Kevin Lowe who is a Gubbi Gubbi man from southeast Queensland and Scientia Indigenous Fellow at the University of New South Wales; Dr. Jacinta Maxwell who is a Pākehā-New Zealander and a non-Indigenous Australian and Senior Lecturer at the School of Linguistics, Adult and Specialist Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia; Associate Professor Nikki Moodie who is a queer Gamilaroi woman and sociologist based at the University of Melbourne. Dr. Marnee Shay who is an Aboriginal (Wagiman) educator and Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Policy Futures at the University of Queensland; and Dr. Sara Weuffen, a non-Indigenous woman of German, Scottish, and Welsh descent and Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales. Collectively the authors have either taught in compulsory or tertiary education in the wider fields of First Nations studies, History, Sociology.

The aim of this special issue is to unpack the value and operation of Aboriginal programs in New South Wales (NSW) secondary schools as a supplementary educational activity sitting alongside mainstream disciplinary studies such as English, Mathematics, Arts, and Physical Education. Voice is centralised. The sovereign voices of Aboriginal students, parents, and communities, the professional voices of teachers and principals, and the collective voice of researchers are integrated to a series of illuminating insights on how Aboriginal programs operate within schools, influence students' learning experiences, and impact on the wider school environment of identity, learning, and engagement. While this special issue seeks to move beyond the deficit discourses that so frequently circulate around Aboriginal education in Australia, highlighting the key arguments of these deficit conversations is critical for speaking back to them and uncovering better ways of working. The voices of participants give life to the many COAG Reports of overcoming education disadvantage by working culturally and relationally (National Indigenous Australian Agency, 2020; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2009), and annual Closing the Gap Reports (Prime Minister & Cabinet, 2020) which have consistently identified lower levels of Aboriginal student retention across Years 7–12 (31.3%) and lower levels of literacy and numeracy as compared to their non-Indigenous peers, lower levels of student wellbeing and the scandalous levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance and suspension (Graham et.al., 2022).

As an early and connected response to the key inquiry focus of Aboriginal cultural and linguistic programs in mainstream schools, this special issue presents two strategic, thought-provoking, and critical conceptual responses from cross-cultural teams to contextualise the *Aboriginal Voices* data and present provocative standpoints about the future of First Nations education in Australia. It is a timely and critical focus because existing scholarship indicates a significant lack of understanding about why these programs operate, for what reasons, the educational impacts for Aboriginal students, and continued pedagogical work of teachers (Hooley & Ryan,

2008; Lowe et al., 2021; Riley, 2015; Smith, 2018). Examination of educational programs designed for Aboriginal students in this issue “contribute(s) to a national vision of Australia, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and the non-Indigenous Australians working together to decolonise the parochial concepts of targets and outcomes that currently shackle the works of teachers, students, their parents, and communit[ies]” (Guenther et al., 2019). It is also timely that the findings presented feed into two significant pieces of school-based projects happening in Australia currently; the Culturally Nourishing Schools project (Lowe et al., 2022) and Culturally Responsive Schooling (Rigney & Hattam, 2022).

Contributions from the papers

While this special issue highlights primarily data from Phase One of the *Aboriginal Voices* project, each paper provides provocative thoughts and contributes insightful findings about the current state Aboriginal education in Australia from the voices of those at the coalface. The two strategic responses extend discourses presented in the empirical papers to provoke on the futurity of schooling for Aboriginal students specifically, and all students broadly. Overall, this special issue highlights the daily experiences of being an Aboriginal student in contemporary NSW secondary schools in Australia to communicate Aboriginal aspirations for success in education, the place of Aboriginal identity and culture within the schooling experience, and the impediments and opportunities for structural and pedagogical reform. As exemplified from the paper synopses provided below, while there was a strong theme of elimination emanating from the settler-colonial schooling spaces and participants of non-Indigenous descent, Aboriginal students, their families, and communities are speaking back, actualising activism, and indicating clearly the way towards more culturally responsive and nourishing education that accommodates the needs of Aboriginal students. An outcome of which has tangible benefits for all involved in the Australian education system.

Moodie and Fricker’s (2022) paper, *Applying Decolonising Race Theory to the Aboriginal Voices project*, outlines the conceptual and methodological approach to the *Aboriginal Voices* data and unpacks how data analysis was consistently applied across each of the empirical papers. Extending from Moodie’s (2018) critical interrogation of Decolonising Race Theory (DRT), the framework assists in mean-making of empirical data to uncover both the onto-epistemological and bodily harm of colonial schooling systems, and the resultant disconnected experienced suffered by many Aboriginal. Further, this analysis facilitates unashamedly a normative position on Aboriginal rights and interest in education. This was done via a circular praxis model of collaboration that created a DRT coding framework based on how the seven DRT tenants might be present in a settler-colonial schooling system. As the authors state, this is the first iteration of the framework and one designed specifically for the *Aboriginal Voices* project. It is not without limitation. However, descriptions of how the framework may provide opportunities for other researchers to elevate Aboriginal rights and knowledges by continually challenging settler-coloniality in

education and privileging sovereign onto-epistemologies, voices, and epistemic futurity.

Lowe and Weuffen's (2022) paper, "*You get to feel your culture*": *Aboriginal students speaking back to deficit discourses in Australian schooling*, foregrounds the voices of Aboriginal students and presents their experiences of culture and language programs in mainstream Australian secondary schools. Using data from focus groups gathered from the *Aboriginal Voices* project, the paper provides insights into why over \$45 billion in funding (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Haughton & Australian Parliament Library, 2020) over the past decade from *Closing the Gap* strategies have failed to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal students. Moving beyond deficit discourses, or hyper-focusing on academic outcomes – as tends to be prioritised across governmental interventions – the authors provoke that the consistent denial and invalidation of Aboriginal Peoples ontological, socio-political, and epistemic presence and sovereignty is one of the key reasons that Aboriginal students choose not to participate in schooling. The student responses in this paper are candid. They indicate anger, fear, and frustration about the indifference exhibited to Aboriginal student's educational outcomes. Yet, the paper also highlights the political activism of Aboriginality that students mobilise to campaign for the integration of language, culture, identity, community, and Country as critical to their educational aspiration and success. Ultimately, the empirical evidence provided in this paper shines a light on the importance and power of student voices for informing future policies and practices of education that directly impact them.

Fricker, Moodie, and Burgess' (2022) paper, "*Why can't we be smart?*": *Exploring school community partnership through Decolonising Race Theory* makes space for the voices of Aboriginal students' families, community members, and Elders to inform discussions about contemporary education practices. Even though much of the existing literature speaks to the importance of school-community partnerships to supporting Aboriginal students' participation in schooling, this paper exposes the pervasiveness of deficit positioning about Aboriginality that often informs school's abrogation of responsibility. The vignettes from families and community members demonstrates not only the complexity of school-community partnerships but also the moments of healing and recognition made possible by authentic and responsive relationships. The authors conclude that there is not a simple binary of right or wrong in doing partnerships. Rather, insights provided by Aboriginal families and communities indicate the possibilities of transformative change, healing, and connection when schools commit to building and fostering inclusive, tolerance, and responsive partnerships.

Shay, Sarra, and Lampert's (2022) paper, *Indigenous education policy, practice, and research: Unravelling the tangled web* provides contextual insights relating to the findings of empirical papers by proposing why there has been little systemic change in First Nations education across Australia. The authors draw attention to the overwhelming failure of schooling institutions and government departments to deliver effective policy reform around First Nations education that is rooted firmly in power/knowledge relations of evidence (re)production. In addition to the influence of dominant socio-political ideologies of settler-colonialism in Australian society, the lack of First Nations professional representation in the

teaching and academic workforces, they question whether previous policies have been informed by robust evidence or First Nations-based evidence. Ultimately, the paper champions the notion of codesign, and listening to First Nations voices, for working collaboratively to implement new educational policies and transforming discourses of First Nations education across the political, practice, and research domains.

Weuffen, Maxwell, and Lowe's (2022c) paper, *Inclusive, colour-blind, and deficit: Understanding teachers' contradictory views of Aboriginal students' participation in education* delves into an area of Aboriginal education that often receives a great deal of attention but where empirical evidence is scant. They argue that with the introduction and subsequent revisions of significant cultural, curriculum, and pedagogical policies across state and federal education jurisdictions in recent decades, teachers constantly battle balancing the increasing, and at times, competing demands of their workloads. When coupled with the hyper-focus on metrics as measures of academic success, the authors highlight that teachers increasingly feel frustrated, pressured, and restricted in their capacity to undertake professional development, particularly in the field of Aboriginal education. Analysis of interviews indicates that while teachers possess a pedagogical desire to connect with Aboriginal students and communities to enact change, centre equality, and undertake reparative activism in school-based practices, wider socio-educational discourses, and competing pedagogical pressures manifests in overarching deficit discourses. These discourses play out with teachers expressing theoretical support for Aboriginal programs in mainstream schooling so long as they do not interfere with *normal* schooling priorities. The authors contend that this educational space is tricky and complex. Yet, they argue that increased prioritisation for fostering understanding among the teaching workforce via student–teacher–community relationships that centre Aboriginal sovereignty, identity, and cultures are keys to transformational change; for teachers, for students, for communities, and for Australian education.

Burgess, Fricker, and Weuffen's (2022) paper, *Lesson to learn, discourses to change, relationships to build: How Decolonising Race Theory can articulate the interface between school leadership and Aboriginal students' schooling experiences* turns to the role of leadership as central within schools to affecting change for Aboriginal students. Analysis of interview data highlights that while principals acknowledge and make genuine efforts to incorporate cultural programmes that support Aboriginal identity within their respective schools, deficit and assimilatory discourses were still evident. Critically, such views held by the most senior leader in the school was seen to filter across and infect the entire social environment. This is evident when examining interviews between principals and teachers and the pervasiveness of deficit discourses relating to Aboriginal students running alongside other *normative* schooling expectations. For example, that participation in cultural programs was seen to impede Aboriginal students' academic success, and in some cases, the responsibility and blame for poor outcomes relegated to students' families and communities. The authors contend that the pervasive undermining presence of neo-colonial policies and practices plays out in these situations to a point that they constrain principals and teachers cycles of measurable and comparable outcomes that render Aboriginal students as deficit despite everyone's best efforts.

Weuffen, Lowe, Burgess, and Thompson's (2022a) paper, *Sovereign and pseudo hosts: The politics of hospitality for negotiating culturally nourishing schools* proposes an alternative conceptualisation of Aboriginal students' participation in Australian schooling institutions. Drawing on Derrida's (2000) notion of hospitality, the authors argue that the state, and by extension, schools have taken it upon themselves to act as hosts of education, determining and validating notions of success. In turn, this positions Aboriginal students as guests on their own lands, and in their own Countries, who are subject to the rules, regulations, and whims of the state/school with little authority to propose recommendations for change. Far from a fanciful academic endeavour, the authors state that the lexicon of hospitality offers up an accessible understanding for envisioning culturally nourishing school practices for Aboriginal students. In an era when calls for privileging Aboriginal onto-epistemologies in education is gaining momentum, this paper suggests that a hospitality framework is useful for progressing schooling practices that are more tolerant, respectful, authentic, nourishing, and responsive to Aboriginal sovereignty, identities, and cultures.

The final paper by Weuffen, Lowe, Moodie, and Fricker (2022b) titled *Doing decolonisation: Cultural reconnection as political resistance in schooling* pulls together the empirical data from the four papers (Burgess, et al., 2022; Fricker et al., 2022; Lowe & Weuffen, 2022; Weuffen et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) in this special issue to analyse how Aboriginal students experience schooling in Australia today. They highlight that notions of community, relationality, healing, and change tend to be at the centre of schooling practices but mobilised along a race-based dichotomy. This manifests via process of 'slightly browning' (Fricker, 2017) where Aboriginal knowledges and/or perspectives are embedded within the curriculum and/or deficit discourses surround perceptions of academic success for Aboriginal students. Reflecting claims made in the previous paper (Weuffen et al., 2022a) about a need to shift understandings how Aboriginal students participate in schooling, the authors of this paper argue that provision of Aboriginal-focused cultural programs within Australian education is both simple and complex. But complexity should not be used as an excuse for inaction. Rather, they propose that the time has come for the state, and by extension Australian education, to be orientated towards more responsive and nourishing ways of respecting Aboriginal sovereignty to (re)define what curriculum and how students participate and experience success in schooling.

The new era of sovereign educational activism

While most of the papers presented in this special issue draws on what some may consider a small amount of data collected as part of the *Aboriginal Voices* project—six schools and 186 participants, made up of 100 students, 48 family and community members, 32 teachers and 6 principals—the evidence and strategic responses provided clearly demonstrate the reality of on-the-ground experiences of schooling for Aboriginal students in Australia. At times, it may appear that little has changed over the past several decades of targeted scholarship, policy development, and intervention programs. Racism is still rampant in the sector and academic outcomes are

perceivably lacking in comparison. Yet, this special issue highlights a new era of sovereign activism. An era of Aboriginal students, families, communities, and scholars proudly mobilising their identities as sovereign peoples of the Australian continent, who with their non-Indigenous allies, are demanding changes to neo-colonial education. Changes that are responsive to sovereignty, agency, and futurity. It is our hope that the evidence-based research and conceptual pieces presented in this special issue provides educational governance, policy development, and pedagogical practices in Australia with insights into ways of rethinking westernised notions of inclusion, respect, and reconciliation, to transform schooling and envisioning notions of success *as* an Aboriginal student.

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Declarations

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Cathie Burgess is a non-Aboriginal educator born and working in Gadigal Country in Aboriginal education for 40 years and is parent of Aboriginal children. She coordinates, lectures, and researches in the areas of Aboriginal Studies curriculum, Aboriginal-led teacher professional learning, Learning from Country and Aboriginal Education leadership.