The elephant in the Australian Staffroom: Introducing race and racism into debates over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION
As is our custom, I am an Aboriginal man, a Narrunga man, a descendent of the oldest living culture of humanity, I pay my respect to the local custodians of the land, the people of Scotland and their ancestors.

I pay respects to my ancestors and my Elders that continue their legacy of nurture and wisdom that has brought me here today.

I acknowledge their tenacity and strength of character in not allowing the British colonial legacy to totally destroy our spiritual connection to our lands and seas and the continuance of place and identity in the Australia of the 21st Century and indeed the world.

Today I pose the question, “Is Australia a comfortably racist nation?” as recently described by the British comedian and reporter for the Daily Show, John Oliver who described Australia as:

“…a sensational place, albeit one of the most comfortably racist places I’ve ever been in. They’ve really settled into their intolerance like an old resentful slipper.”

In my presentation, I will discuss the current Australian education policies, where the main measures of success for Aboriginal Australians is our assimilation into the dominant culture through the mastering of English literacy and Western norms. The understanding of our own history, culture, languages and shared experience since Colonisation has been relegated to the margins.

I know that from working in the Australian education system for over thirty-five years, Aboriginal educators have been arguing for a paradigm shift in the way the Western pedagogy and epistemology (the dominant culture of power and privilege) dominates the way Aboriginal students are being educated and assessed.

Despite socio-economic and political gains made since Federation 1902 our voices are still marginalised. We continue to be positioned as the other, as objects in the discussion or the afterthought to the initial debate.

Today I want to reflect on the issue of race and racism in Australia through the lens of an Aboriginal person, as a First Australian, where we see race and racism beyond just the country’s populace but how it permeates the dominate culture in maintaining white privilege.

I will make some observations from recent research projects that I have been involved in where race and racism have been identified as an issue. These projects include:

- the inclusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives in the development of the National Australian Curriculum;
- work on the curriculum for Initial Teacher Education Programs to address the focus areas of the National Teachers Standards that relate to Aboriginal Education; and
• a project to increase the numbers of Aboriginal teachers in Australian schools through the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiatives (MATSITI).

First however, I wish to provide you with a quick overview of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population and the levels of disadvantage that makes the First Australians as the Last Australians on every socioeconomic indicator.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census on Population and Housing (2011ii), there are over 21 million people in Australia. We are a highly multicultural country, with more than 26% of our population born overseas.

In a report released by Credit Suisse (2012 as cited by King 11 October 2013iii), the median wealth of Australians was identified to be the highest in the World. We fare better than Switzerland and Norway.

However, the positive consequences of living in one of the World’s wealthiest nations are not felt by many of our First Nations peoples.

In response to the ongoing, trans-generational consequences of Colonisation and the policies that followed, the high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage that continues to plague the majority of my community is devastating. Let me take a few moments to paint the real picture for you.

According to the Summary of Australian Indigenous Health (2012iv) and the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (2012v), it was identified that:

• the life expectancy for Indigenous males is 67.2 years compared to 78.7 years for non-Indigenous males. Life expectancy for Indigenous females is 72.9 years, compared to 82.6 years.

• the leading causes of death for Indigenous people are:
  o cardiovascular disease;
  o cancer; and
  o injury (including transport accidents and self-harm).

• Indigenous babies are more likely to die in the first year of life.

• cardiac and related conditions were approximately 1.3 times more common for Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people.

• diabetes related deaths are seven times higher for Indigenous people compared to non-Indigenous people.
• approximately one-in-five Indigenous people have reported that either themselves, a family member and/or friend have been involved with the Corrections system in the previous twelve months.

• Indigenous Australians are over represented among Australia’s homeless population and are over-represented in every category of homelessness.

• we have the worst literacy and numeracy levels in years 3, 5 and 9.

• the school attendance rates for Indigenous children aged 3-5 years are slightly lower when compared to non-Indigenous children.

• Indigenous student (47.2%) attendance rates are lower compared to non-Indigenous students (79.4%) from the first year of high school to year 12.

• Indigenous students (45.4%) are less likely to complete year 12 compared to non-Indigenous students (88.1%).

• Indigenous students (10%) are less likely to achieve a university entrance score compared to non-Indigenous students (46%).

• in 2010, Indigenous students comprise 1.4% of all university enrolments, and are less likely to participate in university and have lower retention and completion rates compared to non-Indigenous students.

As you can see, the positive consequences of living in a wealthy nation are not felt by all. This further begs the question, if Australia is the Lucky Country, we must ask, for whom? It is in my view that the prevalence of such disadvantage can only exist as a consequence of institutionalised racism that is deeply ingrained in our society.

In Australia, there is a lack of analysis on the impact of racism in Indigenous educational outcomes; and whilst there is a lack of evidence, White Australia can continue to argue that racism is not the issue that results in poor educational outcomes. So I argue that race and racism is the elephant in Australian staffrooms and classrooms.

To achieve the laudable goal of educational parity, the Australian educational system, must examine its own Whiteness. Burton (1991 as cited by De Plevitz 2007, p.60vi), articulates that institutional policies are not culture neutral; rather they tend “to be informed by the histories, capabilities and cultures of those who draft them.”

The Australian education system continues to be informed by the Colonialist Agenda. As identified by the 1991 Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (and as cited by De Plevitz 2007), the Australian educational system is based upon “a hierarchical model of Western society”. The incongruence between White and Aboriginal Australia, was recognised by De Plevitz (2007) to further result in Aboriginal students feeling isolated and
alienated, and contributes towards high rates of absenteeism and student withdrawals, low self-esteem and academic underachievement.


The Australian Government has agreed to the development and implementation of a National Australian Curriculum which explicitly identifies three cross-curriculum priorities, one of which being the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. This National Curriculum is described to be a world class curriculum. However, some Aboriginal educators, including myself are referring to this National Curriculum as *the silent apartheid*. This priority will fail to be implemented if the curriculum writers continue to marginalise and discount the value of Indigenous content in the subject areas.

With the exception of the Geography and History curriculum area, other areas of the Australian curriculum have remained largely invisible with regards to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. In a letter to the Chair of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) by Dr Kaye Price (dated 20 March 2013) on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee, it was stated that the denying of Indigenous content in curriculum areas

> ... denies Australian teachers the opportunity to meet the standards required of them and denies non Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students any exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and cultures.

Dr Price (2013) continued stating that:

> ... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people will continue to be marginalised and excluded. The concept of ‘windows and mirrors’ will be perpetuated, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will only see windows in the curriculum; mirrors will be relegated to the abyss and our students will not see themselves reflected in day-to-day activities in a pedagogy of benign neglect.

The relegating and discounting of Indigenous content to the margins emphasises that the Australian education system approaches curriculum design with a degree of colour blindness. According to Howard (2006, p.57vii) colour blindness assumes that:

> “we can erase our racial categories, ignore differences and thereby achieve an illusory state of sameness or equality”

It is my opinion, that if the development and implementation of the National Curriculum does not successfully address the priority of implementing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
perspectives across include Aboriginal across the curriculum and informed by good pedagogy it will fail all Australian students and in particular the current and future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

**Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals:**


Another major decision by Australian Governments is the creation of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). AITSL is responsible for:

- rigorous professional standards;
- fostering and driving high quality professional development for teachers and school leaders; and
- working collaboratively across jurisdictions and engaging with key professional bodies.

AITSL has developed seven national standards, two of which have focus areas regarding strategies about the most appropriate way to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and teaching Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum.

**Focus Area 1.4**

Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

**Focus Area 2.4**

Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

An important part of the implementation is, understanding the relationship between race and racism. This is supported through the study authored Moreton Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk and Robinson (2012, p.1viii), who articulate that,

> Unless the relationship between racial privilege and racial disadvantage is understood the development of an effective Indigenous pedagogy remains beyond the scope of the national standards.

**RRR Project: Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation**

[http://rrr.edu.au](http://rrr.edu.au)
I have led a Project Team in developing an online course for initial teacher education programs. The course consists of three separate modules with 13 topics.

- Module 1: Know yourself – know your world;
- Module 2: Know your students; and
- Module 3: Know what you teach.

Within Module 1 there are three topics, including:

- Respect, relationships and reconciliation;
- Values, culture and identity; and
- An anti-racism pedagogy.

We believed that Module 1: Know yourself - know your world, had to provide the teacher the opportunity to self-reflect upon their own identity and to understand how the broader societal dominance has shaped their worldviews. As identified by Howard (2006, p.30),

> how is it possible, with so much research and information available about multicultural issues today, that prospective educators can complete their entire teaching education and certification program without gaining a deeper grasp of social reality

We believe the conversation about race and racism needed to have occurred in Module 1. This was to ensure that the discussion was had upfront.

Our work was underpinned by transformative learning pedagogy, which is described by Mezirow (1996 as cited by Teaching for Change n.d.16) as

> The process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action

Our final report to AITSL recommended that further work must be commissioned to further inform the development of an anti-racism pedagogy and effective pedagogy for Aboriginal Students. This work must be developed, guided and implemented through the lens of the First Australians.

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI)

www.matsiti.edu.au
An important part of the National Agenda is to have a culturally inclusive Australian educational workforce. This requires a substantial increase of Aboriginal people in the education workforce as teachers and educational leaders. I was successful in winning an Australian Government tender of $7.5 million to:

- increase the number of Aboriginal teachers in the classroom; and
- develop strategies to increase the numbers of Aboriginal leaders in schools.

At the moment, there are just over a cohort of 2000 Aboriginal teachers representing approximately 1% of the 250,000 teachers across 10,000 Australian schools. We want this to reflect the percentage of the Aboriginal student population which stands around 4% of student population.

Anecdotally, the employment and retention of Aboriginal educators and staff is identified to have an impact on the retention and attendance of Aboriginal students. As identified by Howard (2006) children can’t be what they can’t see….successful role models.

In our initial research with undergraduate Aboriginal students enrolled within teacher education programs, early career Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal principals and Aboriginal leaders in the educational jurisdictions, all have identified racism as a major issue/barrier impeding the educational success of Aboriginal students.

To create a sense of agency to address racism as a matter of urgency, we have established strong relationships with stakeholders including: universities, professional bodies, and state/national education authorities. The Australian Council of Deans of Education has allowed us to begin a conversation explicitly about racism in order to create a collective voice which agrees that racism exists and education is the most proactive way to address it.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Australia is a country that has great difficulty accepting its racism. This is highlighted by its policies in regards to its First Peoples.

In answering the question I posed at the beginning of my presentation “Is Australia a comfortably racist nation?” my answer would be yes.

In our discomfort to name it, describe it and own it, we fail in our capacity to address it. We cannot afford in 21 Century Australia to have a futile exercise allowing the ignorance, intolerance and lack of respect for diversity to continue and racism will continue to be the elephant in Australian’s school’s staffrooms and classrooms.

As places of knowledge creation and critique, the higher education sector has a moral and ethical responsibility to facilitate conversation on racism.
The important issue for Aboriginal Australians, and I would say for all Colonised nations, is for the Western Academy to allow us to have the space as First Nations peoples to deconstruct the impact of dominant cultures on our way of being.

We must be given the space and the capacity to address the legacy of the Colonial agenda by allowing us to enshrine our knowledge frameworks in the way our scholarship and research should occur in Higher Education Institutions. This is so we can address our rights as Indigenous peoples as agreed in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the impact of racism.

Thank you.

Census of Population and Housing
7 Howard, G 2006, We can’t teach what we don’t know, 2nd Edn., Teachers College Press