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The Aboriginal Voices Project: What Matters, and Who Counts, in Indigenous Education

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Introduction

Between 2017 and 2020, the Aboriginal Voices (AV) project conducted 10 systematic reviews—examining over 13,000 publications—in the field of Indigenous education. Our team crossed 10 Australian universities and involved 13 researchers, each focused on the critical issue of hearing how the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been included in the scholarly literature on education and schooling. The AV project is one of few studies to apply a systematic meta-analysis of empirical research in the field of education, let alone Indigenous

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education in Australia. Whilst the method has its limits, it is useful to assess and synthesise empirical studies. This allows researchers and practitioners to develop practice guidelines, policy settings or learning opportunities based on real evidence.

By 2020, the AV project had published ten systematic reviews in two special issues of leading education journals. The first collection of reviews in *Australian Education Researcher* consisted of six topics, curriculum, school and community engagement, racism, pedagogy, remote education and professional learning. The second collection published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* covered literacy, numeracy, leadership and cultural programmes. Together, these ten areas represent key concerns for Indigenous families and communities, schools, governments and researchers. As a result of our meta-analysis, we can draw reliable conclusions about:

- What counts as *knowledge*?
- What counts as *success*?
- What counts as *evidence*?

In this book, we present all the reviews together for the first time, rewritten, updated and focused on interpreting our findings for families, schools, researchers and policy makers.

These questions prioritise Indigenous peoples' needs, safety and knowledges, as an issue of social justice. They must be resolved in Indigenous peoples' favour, to meet their aspirations, and acknowledge the rights afforded to them under national and international law. These questions also allow us to reflect on *whose voices count* in Indigenous education research, policy and practice. While systematic reviews of empirical

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literature may not always offer in-depth theoretical analyses, they do allow us to compare findings and where possible, enable research to be replicated and confirmed. This provides insight into the types of programmes that are funded and evaluated, the type of participants that researchers collect data from, and the nature of policy and programme interventions in various fields. In short, the Aboriginal Voices project allows us to see where and how the voices of Indigenous students and families are reflected in the research.

The project reviewed empirical research that claimed to show evidence responding to one of the biggest challenges faced by education systems in Australia—why and how has the system continued to fail Indigenous students. Our conclusion, based on these reviews, offers a critical reflection on that fundamental issue of *who counts* in Indigenous education. We consider the limitations and utility of adopting the systematic review method, one that is more familiar to health researchers. What it does do well is ensure that researchers *disclose* biases, sample sizes, ethics, positioning and characteristics of researchers, theories and methods, and coding and analysis strategies (Cochrane Collaboration, 2011). The method enables a very particular type of ruler to run over the research on Indigenous students' experience of schooling. We wanted to listen to and reflect on what parents and communities said in the research, and then check what evidence was offered about any programmes or approaches that improved outcomes for their young people (Lowe et al., 2019b). We found that while some approaches have good evidence, others illuminate a disconnect between the research and practice. More significantly, we found that Indigenous voices are often not heard or counted by teachers, school leaders or policymakers.

Secondly, we describe competing claims in the research about *what counts as success*. Research in the fields of remote education (Guenther et al., 2019), pedagogy (Burgess et al., 2019), curriculum (Harrison et al., 2019) and literacy (Gutierrez et al., 2019) highlights how two—often incommensurate—visions of Indigenous students' school success exist. Here, Indigenous families and communities talk about success in terms that might be understood as *civic inclusion and participation*. Schools and governments instead talk about *jobs*. Whilst not necessarily mutually exclusive, they highlight radically different ontological positions. The

former (success-as-inclusion) sees students as already constituted by family, culture and community, bearing considerable responsibility for self and others. From this perspective, schools bear the responsibility of preparing students for a fulsome participation in a society that includes both Indigenous and settler peoples. In contrast, schools and governments tend to see *being part of society* as only a fortuitous side-effect of having paid, full-time work. Success in this latter imagining is restricted to employment, and personhood is limited to employability, namely an individual's capacity to achieve private ownership of land (Rowe & Tuck, 2017, p. 9). This incommensurability of Indigenous aspirations and settler imaginings of "success" have emerged as a small but essential body of work describing the shaping of student subjectivities (Osborne et al., 2017, p. 2) and the erasure of Indigenous difference (Povinelli, 2001).

Finally, the AV project draws conclusions about *what counts as evidence*. The project sought to recognise the burden of research that consistently asks Indigenous students, parents and communities 'what works?' After decades of research, what definitive answers can we give Indigenous families, and the schools and teachers they entrust their children to? Indigenous people across Australia have consistently said: teach our complete history, see your place in that history, employ Indigenous people and talk to community (Behrendt et al., 2012; Schwab, 1995). So, rather than add to the burden of extractive research, the AV project sought to hear the voices of Indigenous people through this meta-analysis and consolidate the latest empirical research to:

1. reduce exploitation of communities with small relative populations;
2. support the allocation of funding to communities, and their researchers in order to drive their own research priorities and
3. clarify public commentary and provide expert advice to policymakers.

The Aboriginal Voices project offers a consolidation of research that goes beyond an engagement with theory, operating from the position that there is an emerging burden of evidence regarding issues affecting the underachievement of Indigenous students in Australia (Lowe et al., 2019b). Often policy and practice appear to contravene this evidence,

such as in the adoption of attendance strategies that don't work (Guenther, 2019) or the lack of anti-racism measures in schools (Moodie et al., 2019), thus functioning to actively harm Indigenous students. In hearing the experiences of Indigenous students, families and communities, we hope to demonstrate consistency in their ongoing calls to support more robust praxis for both education workers and researchers in the field.

Findings

Key findings across the ten topic areas highlight a disconnect between practice and outcomes. This means that what teachers think they were doing and what was actually happening in the classroom or in their relationships with Indigenous students were often different things. Occasionally, the research assumes that particular practices lead to particular outcomes, without disentangling contributing or confounding factors (Burgess et al., 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2019). Overall though, the empirical research did not appear to be oriented towards Indigenous student outcomes, but rather focussed on 'engagement and support' or reviewing programmes without mapping how these improved or hindered Indigenous student outcomes.

These insights allow the AV project to explore how assumptions about Indigenous student needs translation into research design and evidence, which informs teaching practice and the relational possibilities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, knowledges and pedagogy. The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the research offer countervailing insights, and it is these voices we aim to centre in our analysis: voices that offer a nuanced critique on the position of Indigenous knowledges, and reflections on the purpose of learning for young people who are already citizens (Harrison et al., 2019); voices that provide deep insights on what it means to trust teachers and schools (Lowe et al., 2019a); voices that reveal the disconnect between what teachers do and what they think they do (Burgess et al., 2019); and voices that allow us to see how thin and partial the research base can be (Miller & Armour, 2019; Vass et al., 2019).

What Counts as Knowledge?

Central to understanding the variability of Indigenous achievement in schooling is the uneven representation of Indigenous perspectives in curriculum and resistance to embedding Indigenous ways of working. The impossibility of epistemic equity for Indigenous people and knowledges and colonial systems has long been an area of concern for scholars (Martin, 2003; Osborne, 2016; Povinelli, 2001), and the findings of the AV project reinforce this long-standing work on the impact of unequal power and unequal representation in schooling systems. Whilst this denotes the incommensurability of education policy and Indigenous aspirations (Osborne, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012), the findings of the AV project demonstrate the possibilities of curriculum designed by and for Indigenous peoples in reshaping relationships between teachers and students, and families and schools.

National and state approaches to literacy highlight decades of policy failure (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020; Yunupingu, 1995). Research by Gutierrez et al. (2019) demonstrates that while programmes that focused on teaching the mechanical and code-breaking aspects of literacy often demonstrate good outcomes, they simultaneously betray government and school leaders' deficit assumptions about Indigenous learners. This manifests in a reluctance to involve local communities, ignoring what Indigenous students need to know and be able to do to navigate both worlds. Hence, literacy programmes often do a good job of teaching about *language*, but not necessarily a good job of developing *literacy* skills for a broader participation in life. Literacy and numeracy needs are therefore conflated in problematic ways with the Closing the Gap targets (DPMC, 2020), and consequently, teaching practice assimilates Indigenous students to the settler language, rather than valuing and working with the language assets that students arrive at school with.

Curriculum is a contested area attracting national attention about what should and should not be taught. In the Australian curriculum, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority is represented as an add-on, a potential engagement strategy, and/or is simply

ill-defined and often misinterpreted. As representational practice, the cultural politics of curriculum (Vass, 2018) reveals the unequal and racialised power relations that shape Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities through schooling (Hogarth, 2018). What counts as knowledge often does not align with Indigenous notions of relational, place-based understandings of what knowledge is. These knowledges tend to disrupt western narratives of individualism, personal achievement and self-sufficiency in favour of other ways of connecting to the world and each other (Harrison et al., 2019). Indigenous knowledges are thus seen as less rigorous and less relevant than settler knowledges (Scantlebury et al., 2002). In the systematic review on curriculum, Harrison et al. (2019) find that curriculum models based on a "funds of knowledge" approach challenge deficit assumptions by recognising that students bring with them, historically and culturally embedded knowledges that are in fact the foundation for their wellbeing and healthy functioning in any society (p. 243).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the systematic reviews on pedagogy by Burgess et al. (2019), community engagement by Lowe et al. (2019a), and teacher professional learning by Vass et al. (2019) all also draw attention to the role and import of moving towards schooling efforts that open up pathways to ask critical questions about knowledge making practices.

What Counts as Success?

The vision from the settler colonial state, its agents and apparatus, is that success at school equates to *participation in the economy as a future employee* (Apple, 2006). Counter to this runs the vision that emphasises how success is synonymous with *participation in society as an extant citizen*—as an agent of cultures that have survived and agentic regardless of age or achievement (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014). The role and influence of the schools in raising young people with responsibilities to people and Country take precedence over an emphasis on jobs and economic mobility (Guenther et al., 2013). This means that culturally specific land and stewardship, values regarding the knowledge held and role played by teachers, and an appreciation of history that acknowledges the

power that individuals play in shaping our shared experiences, are critical. As Harrison et al. (2019, p. 242) note, "Aboriginal and western curricula are largely irreconcilable because of the ways in which concepts such as success are defined and applied in Aboriginal and western contexts", then schooling success depends in large part on student and family perceptions of what education is for (Harrison et al., 2019, p. 243).

In the systematic review on pedagogy, Burgess et al. (2019) find a correlation between Indigenous student numbers and the prevalence of defensive teaching practices in schools, thus signalling a focus on behaviour management rather than learning. Not only does this reduce opportunities for culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, it belies the extent to which schools invest in Indigenous success or are able to give effect to Indigenous students and families educational aspirations. Burgess et al. (2019) found that many of the pedagogical interventions focussed more on changing non-Indigenous teachers' attitudes and behaviours rather than improving Indigenous student outcomes. These findings reinforce the value of recognising different standpoints on the purpose of education (Guenther et al., 2013); and therefore, prioritising Indigenous peoples' definition of successful schooling.

Counterposed against Indigenous values of students-as-already-citizens and success-as-inclusion in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities are long-term economic priorities of settler colonial societies enacted through schooling as preparation for the job market. Whilst the illusion of full-time employment still holds potency for many policymakers, educational systems remain geared to a representation of citizenship that prioritises those modes of production defined by individual entrepreneurship (Apple, 2006). In this rendering, schools bear responsibility for preparing citizens who work, not citizens who belong or indeed already belong. The incommensurability of Indigenous aspirations and settler colonial imaginings of success therefore become rendered as behavioural problems to be managed (Burgess et al., 2019; Rowe & Tuck, 2017; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). In the Lowe et al. (2019a, b) review on effect of culture and language on Indigenous students and families, the central role of identity built on strong culture and language programmes that are valued more broadly in the school community is critical to not only engaging

Aboriginal students in their learning but foreshadowing their success on their own terms as well as in the western sense of the term.

What Counts as Evidence?

Whilst mapping the quality of empirical research led to the exclusion of important theoretical work, and other empirical research that did not meet current reporting benchmarks (e.g. Cochrane Collaboration, 2011), our approach did enable some insight into the quality of research used to inform policy and practice in Indigenous education. For example, in the field of Indigenous numeracy, many researchers make strong claims for the importance of relationships between schools and communities, but "few captured data indicating how this is fostered" (Miller & Armour, 2019, p. 13). Miller and Armour (2019) identify only two important longitudinal studies that assess changes in Indigenous numeracy over time. Burgess et al. (2019) note that in the field of pedagogy, while the overall quality of evidence appears veracious, in those studies where strong evidence of improved outcomes emerge, Indigenous students are only a subset of a larger sample. In the case of literacy, Gutierrez et al. (2019) also report that those studies that suggest success typically retain deficit views of Indigenous learners and communities. This suggests that effective teaching and learning activities fall short of being intellectually challenging or rigorous.

This line of thinking sits alongside the reviews on racism (Moodie et al., 2019) and teacher professional learning (Vass et al., 2019). In the former, it was evident that the schooling sector and education researchers are aware of and acknowledge the ongoing impact of racism. The evidence shows that racism matters, impacting many Indigenous learners' schooling experiences. However, this understanding has not yet seriously addressed issues of representation, institutional/systemic discrimination or theorising of race/Whiteness in ways that meaningfully address the ongoing harm of discrimination. In this instance then, the evidence about race/racism is marginalised or dismissed in ways that ensures the maintenance of the status quo, where non-Indigenous decision-makers continue to implement untested remedies to 'fix' schooling for 'problem' Indigenous learners.

Collectively, this has the effect of producing the circular claim that, for example, literacy and numeracy programmes work for Indigenous students because this is what has been tested. In reality, these programmes are the *only* ones being evaluated using strategies that comply with evidence hierarchies recognised by decision-makers (Centre for Education Statistics & Evaluation, 2020). Such studies don't reflect the needs of Indigenous students or collect and analyse data in alignment with Indigenous methodologies (Smith, 2012). Similarly, Burgess et al. (2019) note that many studies did not establish the construct validity of 'pedagogy' and use the term without definition. Whilst recognising theoretical diversity and the necessity of critique, this does create some difficulty comparing studies that ostensibly explore the same phenomenon.

Methodological Limitations

Although the systematic review method is useful for conducting meta-analyses, we note that it is not always able to specifically include research from Othered perspectives. The method was originally designed to assess large numbers of quantitative studies and provides a robust framework for analysing specific elements of research design. However, in the search for rigour, we are conscious that this method represents qualitative and Indigenous research in particular ways. Established strategies for comparative work tend not to include a specific mechanism for including Indigenous methodologies, ethics or narratives and this is evident in the Long and Godfrey (2004) appraisal checklist. We consider this an important next step in the refinement of this type of research and add a deeper consideration of these questions in Chap. 2.

In the process of conducting our review we found huge diversity in research design, which speaks to the strength of innovation in the field. However, many of those publications were excluded when they did not identify details of that research design, such as describing how many people were included in the sample, the authors' positionality or the specific type of data collection and analysis techniques. Acknowledging that the 'evidence movement' has a sizeable critique, we nonetheless agree that guidelines such as those established by the Cochrane Collaboration

(2011), JBI (2017) or the COREQ checklist (Tong et al., 2007) offer useful strategies not only for writing up research, but also for comparing and synthesising large bodies of literature.

Who Counts?

The findings of the AV project encourage a critical reflection on Indigenous agency and power in education research and practice. As a rhetorical device, and to invoke Indigenous methodologies (Walter & Andersen, 2013), the question of 'who counts?' is deliberately disruptive to prejudicial assumptions about the validity of Indigenous perspectives as well as deficit design in empirical research. Centring Indigenous voices is one way this project has attempted to revise how Indigenous methodologies are applied. But this question extends to deeper issues in the research on curriculum, numeracy, literacy, racism, remote education, leadership and engagement. When Harrison et al. (2019) and Guenther et al. (2019) discuss curriculum and remoteness, both call into question the ways in which Indigenous students are not seen as citizens or are otherwise represented as uneducable.

Perhaps one of the most important points raised is by Lowe et al. (2019a, b) in their paper on engagement. It is something of an accepted critique that school-led engagement strategies primarily aim to reduce student resistance and increasing student compliance by encouraging families to adopt enforcement behaviours at home. These authors, however, suggest that Indigenous families conversely understand engagement as a means by which to deliver the transfer of decision-making power to them. In this synthesis, it would be inaccurate to view engagement as a continuum ranging from information-provision through to shared leadership. For Indigenous families, either engagement is authentic—enabling new partnerships, pedagogies and curriculum based on the transfer of real decision-making power and the creation of stable partnership structures—or it is simply not engagement. Either families are partners bearing decision-making authority, or they are not. Osborne discusses the scale of change that would need to occur for "the current power-laden methods of cursory consultation on pre-existing institutional priorities"

to lead to new ways of working that recognised Indigenous rights (Osborne et al., 2017, p. 258). Osborne suggests this work would lead to fundamental changes in the very definitions of ideas like *education* and *employment* (Osborne et al., 2017, p. 258).

Engagement is therefore not only justified by other possibilities of success, but because it is an equitable state of Indigenous-settler relations. Engagement is power-sharing and integral to delivering internationally recognised rights of Indigenous peoples in the design and management of their education systems (United Nations, 2007). Our reviews suggest that to engage is to enter ethical and just relations with Indigenous peoples; a more fulsome recognition of international rights, legal standing and educational entitlements as sovereign peoples (McMillan & Rigney, 2016). Whose needs count, whose partnership matters (Trimmer et al., 2019, p. 13) and whose safety is prioritised (Moodie et al., 2019) are urgent questions that must be resolved in Indigenous peoples' favour, if outcomes for Indigenous children are to improve.

In the Leadership review, Trimmer et al. (2019) noted that school principals who actively engaged in a relational leadership approach with their local Aboriginal community were able to identify improvements in Aboriginal student outcomes (Riley & Webster, 2016). Moreover, the development of dynamic and flexible educational policy and organisational structures to support Aboriginal community engagement, student retention and academic and social outcomes was considered a key to shifting power from school-led educational reform to community-led improvements. However, these shifts are undermined by government policy that moves towards decentralisation and deregulation of school governance. Bureaucratic accountability is seen to negatively impact on principals being able to meet the learning needs of students and the local community and engage in 'both ways' leadership.

In important fields like pedagogy and numeracy, the voices of Indigenous students, families and communities are often excluded from the research (Burgess et al., 2019, p. 313). Miller and Armour (2019) find that most of the research on numeracy was conducted on teachers' cognition and content knowledge, and often examined only teachers' perceptions of Indigenous students' learning. Empirical research on numeracy tends not to be designed from Indigenous methodologies,

conducted by Indigenous researchers, or include Indigenous students; and, it certainly does not assess change in student numeracy over time. Similarly, the location of empirical studies tends not to disclose that "the fastest growing population of Aboriginal students, those in urban areas, rarely appear in the literature" (Burgess et al., 2019 p. 313) or simply that differences in remote and non-remote Indigenous educational needs and practices (Guenther et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2020) are more visible.

Conclusion

We know that racist discourses about Indigenous peoples' intelligence have long dominated in Australia, and education systems have been a primary vehicle for the reproduction of those discourses (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012). Indeed, the purpose of colonial schooling systems has never been to articulate a fuller expression of Indigenous peoples' rights, and teachers are rarely supported to embed successful and rights-based practices (Vass et al., 2019). The assimilatory function of schools can still be seen in the surveillance of students and families (Llewellyn et al., 2018), streaming children towards prison, domestic and/or manual labour (Gillan et al., 2017, p. 5) and ongoing challenges in adopting culturally responsive teaching (Llewellyn et al., 2018; Vass et al., 2019). Discourses of 'engagement' appear as euphemism for attendance and behaviour management (Purdie & Buckley, 2010) and rarely involve deliberative processes that support the transfer of decision-making power or collaborative decision-making (Cavaye, 2004) to community. When we ask whose voices count in policy and whose are heard in schools, it is plainly not the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Aboriginal Voices project has helped us reflect on the quality of empirical research, particularly where that work is used to justify policy interventions in the fields of literacy, numeracy and attendance (Burgess et al., 2019; Guenther, 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2019; Miller & Armour, 2019). We can more clearly point to the benefits of including Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum (Guenther et al., 2019; Harrison et al., 2019) in decision-making (Trimmer et al., 2019), and of recognising the different aspirations and purposes of schooling that Indigenous students

and family hope for (Guenther et al., 2019; Moodie et al., 2019). The project has highlighted what is working well; teachers supported to engage in robust professional learning, families and communities meaningfully involved in the life of schools and decision-making, and the evidence base on how these improve Indigenous student outcomes. The systematic review method allowed us to pause and review what has gone before, to consolidate our advice to families and teachers and to think again about the orientation of scholarly research and practice. We offer this work in the spirit that future research more effectively engages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their family's voices across Country.

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