



# Talkin' bout a revolution: the call for transformation and reform in Indigenous education

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## Abstract

The areas of concern ('goals', 'domains' and 'priority areas'—whatever policy-makers wish to call them) relating to Indigenous education have not changed since the first National Indigenous education policy in 1989. Deficit discourses, discursive trickery and the inability to report progress continues to demoralise and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain at the lower rungs of educational outcome indicators maintaining societal and institutional constructs. In this paper, I argue that there is a need to dramatically reform the approach to Indigenous education transforming the hegemonic positioning assumed by the coloniser. Essentially, this would take a revolution: a revolutionary transformation of institutional and societal constructs; a cognitive awareness of how language and discourses are used to maintain power and a need to privilege Indigenous voices and knowledges to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights in education are achieved.

**Keywords** Indigenous critical discourse analysis · Policy · Discourse · Indigenous education

## A vignette: self and the notion of revolution

“Don't you know  
They're talkin' bout a revolution  
It sounds like a whisper  
And finally the tables are starting to turn

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Talkin' bout a revolution" (Chapman 1988).

It was the year 1988 when the powerful words of Tracy Chapman played on the radio stations "talkin' bout a revolution"; speaking about equality and breaking the cycle of poverty. At the time, I was entering my teens and the inequities between the 'have' and the 'have nots' was becoming recognisable, as cliques and teenage mean girls quickly made explicit—I was one of the 'have nots'. Chapman's words spoke to me and she gave me hope that someday these explicit labels used to divide and degrade peoples would not only be challenged but changed.

It was not until 2008 that the notion of revolution once again resonated with me. The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd spoke about an 'education revolution' and the then Minister of Education, Julia Gillard "boasted that her education revolution, involving national testing and the MySchool website, computers and trade centres in schools, a national curriculum and Building the Education Revolution infrastructure program, would strengthen schools and raise standards" (Donnelly 2011, February 2). However, the notion of an 'education revolution' was quickly questioned. Reid (2009) found inconsistencies in approaches and asserted that the objectives and agenda were neither future-thinking nor based on best practice or evidence. Donnelly (2014, March 7) also criticised the Labor claim of an 'education revolution', demonstrating the failure of Labor to achieve objectives or meet deadlines and therefore, ultimately becoming a political liability.

At the time, I was the Head of Curriculum at a school where general consensus within teaching staff saw the 'education revolution' and its national testing and curriculum as more work. My colleagues were resistant to change; unaware of the pressures placed on schools and systems to engage or have funding withheld (Reid 2009). The perceived increased workload positioned me, as the one who 'wrote' the curriculum, as 'public enemy No. 1'. Needless to say, my views of the 'education revolution' were quickly tainted.

Revolution in education has been minimal. Lingard et al. (2016) state, "education itself has not necessarily been transformed, but the purposes of education are now narrowly conceived as the production of a certain quantity and quality of human capital" (p. 2). In other words, focus within policy has been placed on structures that ultimately place schools in league tables rather than those which create innovative change and transformation.

The introduction of national testing has enhanced competition and students are increasingly being taught to a test rather than having lifelong learning skills developed. The Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2015) was quickly followed by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2014) and more recently, national testing for pre-service teachers in Numeracy and Literacy prior to registration (Australian Council for Educational Research 2017). The emphasis on 'big data' has taken the

focus from lifelong learning to numbers and tests—an atmosphere that is not conducive to the holistic perspectives of Indigenous peoples.

The use of the term ‘revolution’ entering the political rhetoric excited me as a classroom educator. Foolishly, I thought this meant the end of the traditional classroom with its historically entrenched Western values and ideologies. I wanted to believe that education was to be revolutionised and equitable and to focus on catering for students’ needs for their own potential futures building their self-worth and identities. Silly me!

## Introduction

In 2017, I wrote a paper for *The Conversation*, asking the question of whether policy was being deliberately stalled in Indigenous education (Hogarth 2017a). Essentially, it told the ‘story’ of how Indigenous education policy has not changed since the late 1980s (Hogarth 2016). Policy, explicitly focused on Indigenous education, did not enter the Australian public sphere until 1989 (Department of Education Employment and Training 1989). Since then, the key issues within Indigenous education deemed to be in need of addressing have been labelled ‘long-term goals’ (Department of Education Employment and Training 1989, p. 1), ‘priority domains’ (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011, p. 5) and ‘priority areas’ (Education Council 2015, p. 4), to name a few. With the introduction of National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2013), the increase of competition and the formation of league tables, increased focus has been placed on accountability and transparency within all education sectors. The annual reports on the ‘progress’ toward addressing the targets within the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* [NIRA] (Council of Australian Governments 2008) consistently lament the stalemate apparent when comparing the Numeracy and Literacy outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts (see: for example; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). Yet, policy remains the same, despite changing terms of reference.

## Methodology

To analyse policy discourses, the evolving methodological approach, Indigenous Critical Discourse Analysis [ICDA] is employed (Hogarth 2017b). Combining tenets of Australian Indigenous theoretical frameworks (see Nakata 2007; Rigney 1999) with Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2001b, 2015), ICDA looks to make explicit the Indigenous lens in which policy discourses are analysed and interpreted. Furthermore, ICDA privileges Indigenous voice and empowers me to speak back to the dominant ideologies, assumptions and values found within the social conditions that influence and are influenced by the processes of policy production. Basing my analysis on the principles shared in the

*Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education* [Coolangatta Statement] (Morgan et al. 1999), Indigenous voice is further amplified and a collective voice based on rights and freedoms set within international human rights charters works to challenge the current context in Australian Indigenous education politics.

The analysis of policy presents a paradox. That is, while Indigenous education policy seeks to address the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their non-Indigenous counterparts, policymakers maintain a deficit view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational attainment within discourses. The *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs 2006) states that policy discourse is “predicated on the supposed ‘inferiority’ of Indigenous Australians” (p. 16). Here, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA] makes the point that prevalent deficit discourses are based within history, emulated in politics and normalised within society. Therefore, within this paper, explorations of deficit discourses are provided to illustrate the complexities within the public sphere.

Focus in this paper is also on the discursive trickery used in policy discourses. Discursive trickery alludes to a ‘play on words’. Its application within discourses is broad in nature illustrating the complexities and multifarious layers of discourse. In policy discourses, discursive trickery makes evident the contention between the goodwill intentions and the reality of policy implementation. It identifies taken for granted assumptions of authentic Indigenous content being embedded in curriculum as opposed to tokenistic gestures due to lack of cultural understanding. Furthermore, discursive trickery highlights the illusion of consultation and representation.

In this paper, I explore how language is used to maintain the oppressive control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within Indigenous education policy. Discursive trickery is identified in the current Indigenous education policy, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* [the Strategy] (Education Council 2015), whereby the illusion of Indigenous voice being consulted in policymaking occurs. Finally, the need for a transformation and true revolution in education is discussed.

## Talking down

Terms such as ‘disparity’ (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs 2006, p. 16), ‘deficit’ (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs 2006, p. 16) and ‘failure’ (MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education 2000, p. 14) are used extensively in the literature regarding the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. For example, MCEETYA (2006) states, “*disparity* in educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has come to be viewed as ‘normal’ and incremental change seen as acceptable” (p. 16 [emphasis added]). As MCEETYA suggests, low educational outcomes are normalised within

societal and institutional constructs maintaining dominant ideologies of Indigenous inferiority and implicitly, White superiority.

Further exemplification of deficit discourses can be found in the use of the term 'disadvantage' synonymously with Indigenous education. Krakouer (2016, p. 8 [emphasis added]) highlights "the educational *disadvantage* Indigenous children experience" in relation to the need to improve access to education. The review and evaluation of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014* (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs 2011) stated that its intention and purpose was "aimed at overcoming Indigenous *disadvantage*" (ACIL Allen Consulting 2014, p. 12 [emphasis added]). Discussion of how the consistent rhetoric of deficit within reports about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintains dominant ideologies, reinforces dominant attitudes and beliefs and ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are considered inferior follows.

The persistent messages act to confirm and validate the notion of self-empowerment and how the current conditions experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the results of their inability to access and make use of the opportunities provided to them. Smith (1999) asserts that "for [I]ndigenous communities the issue is not just that they are blamed for their own failures but that it is also communicated to them, explicitly or implicitly, that they themselves have no solutions to their own problems" (p. 92). Here, Smith makes the point that Indigenous peoples are consistently told by media and politicians as well as wider society about the dire hopelessness of their potential futures. Furthermore, while self-empowerment is advocated within the discourses, the notion of self-determination is denied to Indigenous peoples.

### Shifting discourse focus

Concerns about the deficit discourses and the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation within decision making are a common theme emerging within policies, reports and reviews. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities within planning, implementation and evaluation in all schooling in Australia and therefore, the advocacy of Indigenous voice, was evident within the goals of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Education Employment and Training 1989). Within the Coolangatta Statement (Morgan et al. 2006), self-determination was defined as "the right of Indigenous people" (p. 234):

- to control/govern Indigenous education systems;
- to establish schools and other learning facilities that recognise, respect and promote [I]ndigenous values, philosophies and ideologies;
- to develop and implement culturally inclusive curricula;
- to utilise the essential wisdom of Indigenous elders in the education process [and]
- to establish the criterion for educational evaluation and assessment (pp. 234–235).

Such human rights, to govern and control, to determine and participate in the foundations of education decision making, were based on the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that also asserted the right of Indigenous peoples to “freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (United Nations General Assembly 2008, p. 4).

McConville (2002) highlights that the Coolangatta Statement (Morgan et al. 1999, 2006) and the ideologies it advocates for seek agents of change: to transform Indigenous education. In doing so, he asserts that the Coolangatta Statement does not promote a separate educational system but moreover, “it is about ensuring that mainstream institutions, be they schools, TAFE colleges or universities, incorporate in all areas of their activity Indigenous terms of reference and values as articulated by Indigenous peoples” (McConville 2002, p. 17). Here, McConville makes a point that the Coolangatta Statement resists Indigenous education being determined by and controlled by government. It challenges embedded Indigenous educational disadvantage, as exemplified within the deficit discourses of policy. That is, there is a need for “institutions [...] to accept and uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples” (McConville 2002, p. 17).

Illustration of deficit discourses placing blame on Indigenous peoples is found in the MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education’s report (2000). The authors argue that the incommensurable educational outcomes and the resultant consequences reflect “the failure of many parents and caregivers to encourage their Indigenous children to attend school regularly and to support them in achieving competence in literacy and numeracy” (MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education 2000, p. 14). Here, the perceived failures of Indigenous peoples from the hegemonic position of the coloniser are made explicit. The Taskforce contends that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents fail to encourage and support their children’s education; placing blame for the low educational outcomes of Indigenous students on parents.

In response, the Coolangatta Statement (Morgan et al. 1999, 2006) and its resistant discourses contend that the perceived ‘failures’ are based on Western measures that privilege Western ways of knowing, doing and being. It contends that the perceived failures “exist not because Indigenous peoples are less intelligent, but because educational theories and practices are developed and controlled by non-Indigenous peoples” (Morgan et al. 2006, p. 231). In my PhD study (Hogarth 2018), I used the Indigenous lens that the Coolangatta Statement provides to analyse the Strategy (Education Council 2015) and the power relations evident within those discourses. Within the production and decision making of the Strategy, discursive trickery was identified. In this paper, I explore the illusion of collaboration and the inclusion of Indigenous voices being provided within the production of Indigenous education policy as an illustration of this ‘discursive trickery’.

## **Lack of Indigenous representation**

In the obligatory letter of commendation at the front of the Strategy, Kate Jones MP, then Queensland Minister of Education and Chair of Education Council thanks the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group [ATSIEAG] and

their contributions to the production of the Strategy (Education Council 2015). She reflects on how

the [S]trategy is the result of robust discussion, reflection, debate and cooperation and [how] its development has been championed by the Education Council's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group* established by the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee to provide advice on national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy initiatives and directions (Education Council 2015, p. 1 [emphasis added]).

The term, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group*, is a discursive trick. The reference is made up of eight words that merge into one another, and the use of the syntagmatic bond, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, assists in the compounding of the term. The resulting referential and societal meaning is the assumption that the members of this group would be predominantly Indigenous as the name suggests the notion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation. However, this is not so. To contextualise this claim, I provide insight into the discursive trickery 'at play'.

### Discursive trickery

Only the identity of one of the members of ATSIEAG is mentioned in the Strategy (Education Council 2015). Much like the members of the Education Council, the other members of ATSIEAG remain nameless. An extensive investigation to identify the other members of ATSIEAG proved to be in vain and I could only identify the named individual in the Strategy.

The lone reference within the Strategy and the only name located within the investigation is Mr Tony Harrison who was, at the time, "the Chief Executive of the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development" (Education Council 2015, p. 1), from here on referred to as SA-DECD. Mr Harrison was the Chair of ATSIEAG and a member of the formally named Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee [AEEYSOC] (Institute of Public Administration Australia—South Australian Division Inc 2016). Harrison was appointed to the position of Chief Executive of SA-DECD in 2013. Prior to this appointment, he had been the Police Assistant Commissioner for South Australian Police (SAPOL) and prior to that, had held other high-level management positions. He has since taken up the position of leading the Department for Communities and Social Inclusion and was replaced by Rick Persse (Novak 2016).

Harrison's lack of experience within the education sector is noted but unfortunately, such experience is not a pre-requisite for stakeholders in education as a whole. What is of importance is the fact that Harrison is a non-Indigenous White male who was positioned as Chair of a committee that emphasises the notion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' representation. In fact, according to one of the few sources available on ATSIEAG,

membership of the group consists of senior officials with responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and/or early childhood policy from each jurisdiction; a senior official of the National Catholic Education Commission; a senior official of the Independent Schools Council of Australia; and two senior representatives of Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (Department of Finance 2017, para. 2).

The lack of transparency and the de-identification of individuals apart from their roles within other organisations on this Advisory Panel have made me question how many of the members of ATSIEAG are indeed Indigenous as the name suggests, or rather, is the group dominated by the coloniser.

Apart from the explicit reference above to the *two senior representatives of Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies*, investigation of the newly named Australian Education Senior Officials Committee (AESOC) yielded a list of the senior officials alluded to by the Department of Finance (Education Council 2016). Each member is non-Indigenous. The senior officials of the Independent Schools Council of Australia and the National Catholic Education Commission are also non-Indigenous people (see: Independent Schools Council of Australia 2016; National Catholic Education Commission 2016). Therefore, an assumption is made that the only Indigenous representation is the two senior representatives from the now federally defunded, and in some States and Territories—defunct, Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (Reconciliation Australia 2015). Such findings illustrate the discursive trickery of the naming of this group as ATSIEAG. Indigenous voice is limited in this group and therefore, ATSIEAG must be viewed as a non-Indigenous organisation.

## Discussion

Every social event and/or activity is an example of discourse as a social practice and demonstrates the various social processes that occur. Fairclough (2001a) writes that “the reason for centering the concept of social practice is that it allows an oscillation between the perspective of social structure and the perspective of social action and agency—both necessary perspectives in social research and analysis” (p. 231). That is, the interdependence of the social, interdiscursive and discursal elements of social life need to be made explicit.

Policy, in particular, is a mediated quasi-interaction; a genre of governance (Fairclough 2003). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) define mediated quasi-interactions as the “communicative interaction [whereby] the time–space distanciation of mediated interaction [...] entails a division between an individual producer or relatively small production teams and a body of receivers that is indeterminate in size and membership” (p. 43). The producer makes the assumption that there are shared ‘forms of consciousness’ and ‘values’ with the reader/interpreter (or ‘subject/s’). Such assumptions are embedded within the discursal elements. That is, as educators, practices and processes regarding the importance of education, the knowledges and skills required to provide education are all normalised within their practice.



However, as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) warn, the time–space distanti-ation (‘time and place’) reduces and narrows “the range of symbolic resources available for making and interpreting meaning” (p. 42). Therefore, the notion of shared ideologies, values and beliefs that are embedded within social life is necessary. Theoretical constructs form the societal norm. The shared ideologies, assumptions and representations held in society assist in the making of meaning and interpretation of policy.

Since 1788, Indigenous peoples have been forced and mandated to reject their cultural languages and to adopt the language of the coloniser (De Varennes and Kuzborska 2016). Therefore, analysis of how language is used to maintain the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is necessary as Indigenous people seek to find their place in the wider Australian society. Through the use of ICDA, the means by which the values, attitudes and beliefs of White Australia are privileged within policy discourses becomes explicit (Hogarth 2017b). Deficit discourses ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational attainment is regarded as inferior. Discursive trickery is also becoming common-  
place to suggest Indigenous representation when in fact, such representation is minimal.

### **It starts with a whisper**

The Industrial Revolution in the 19th century saw the transformation of agrarian practices to machination increasing productivity (Horn et al. 2010). The French Revolution of the 18th century involved the call for social and political reform (McPhee 2013). Generally speaking, a revolution seeks change. More recently within Australian Indigenous discourses, advocacy for acknowledgement, recognition and change has strengthened. Indigenous voices are claiming their position as agents of change and demanding reform.

A critical conversation has begun in wider Australia. The recent Redfern Statement (National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples 2016) raise concerns with regard to the limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in policy making particularly at a national level, stating that

for the last quarter century [...] we’ve seen seminal reports which have repeatedly emphasised that our people need to have a genuine say in our own lives and decisions that affect our peoples and communities. This, known as self-determination, is the key to closing the gap in outcomes for the First Peoples of these lands and waters (p. 5).

Here, the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples highlights how policy and reports call for the inclusion of Indigenous voice and yet, those voices are marginalised through the dominant representations of the coloniser. Within the even more recent Uluru Statement from the Heart (Referendum Council 2017, p. 1), reform of the Australian Constitution to “empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country” was demanded. A revolution of Australian beliefs, attitudes and values is needed.

In my article for *The Conversation*, commentary from the general public was relatively supportive. I was challenged by one late comment from an individual who drew from the article my statement that my PhD and research is focused on how language in policy emulates colonial Australian ideologies. Birch (2017, July) asked “Why? For what purpose? Let’s assume you prove what you’re setting out to [do]—which is a given. What then insofar as improving Indigenous education?” There is a purpose for making explicit the implicit racist ideologies, superiority and privilege that White Australia either consciously or unconsciously asserts in policy discourses. It involves making the wider Australian community ‘see’ the inequities and the biases held. It involves encouraging personal reflection and proactively seeking change—change in attitudes, change in beliefs and change in values. I recognise that this is not going to be quick. A shift in the deeply embedded colonial ideologies, assumptions and stereotypes will be slow. My call for revolution in Indigenous education policy recognises that it will not happen overnight but it acknowledges that change and reform starts with a whisper.

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