

Has the Australian dream been achieved at the expense of the Aboriginal child?

Lester-Irabinna Rigney

Education Futures, University of South Australia, South Australia, Australia

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Corresponding Author

Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, BEd, MEd, PhD (Flinders), MACE, Professor of Education, University of South Australia, Centre for Research in Education, Education Futures Academic Unit, Magill Campus. GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia. Email Lester.Rigney@unisa.edu.au

Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney is Professor of Education in the Pedagogies for Justice Research group in the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion, based in the Education Futures, Academic Unit at the University of South Australia. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4756-2399>

Biography

One of Australia's most internationally respected Aboriginal educationalists, Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney is Professor of Education in the Pedagogies for Justice Group in the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion, Education Futures, University of South Australia. He is member of the Scientific Committee, Foundation Reggio Children Centro Loris Malaguzzi Italy and was Distinguished Fellow at Kings College, London, Menzies Australia Institute. He is a citizen of the Narungga, Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri Sovereign Nation peoples of South Australia. He is a recognized expert on Aboriginal and minority Education of the Pacific. His research focuses on Aboriginal children's rights and education, Indigenist epistemologies, teachers' work, Aboriginal education, Indigenous Intellectual Sovereignty, Treaty and school reform. He has been involved in national research and Australian Research Council funded projects on teachers' learning; Indigenist Epistemologies and School; Aboriginal Higher Education; and Towards an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy.

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Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney PhD

Ngangkirna miyurna, na marni.
Ladies and Gentlemen, you all good.

Marni naa budni, Kaurna yarta-ana,
It is good that you all came to Kaurna sovereign country, welcome everyone.

Ngai Nari Professor Kudnitya Lester-Irabinna Rigney
My Name is Professor Kudnitya Lester-Irabinna Rigney

Ngaityu yunantalya yakanantalya.
My dearest brothers and dearest sisters, thankyou.

Introduction

What is the Australian dream, whose dream is it, and in whose interest does it serve? The 'Uluru Statement' is calling for a modern Australian dream inclusive of multiple truths, multiple belongings and multiple histories and ways of knowing.

The single Australian dream and identity narrative of growth, hard work, mateship, egalitarian and humanitarian values can be traced - in part - back to writers, Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson. But reading Lawson's '*Drovers Wife*' and '*While my billy boils*' or Paterson's '*The Man from Snowy River*' and '*Waltzing Matilda*' - neither men accounted for the survival of the Aboriginal child after brutal and bloody invasion. Neither men envisioned the rapid social change toward school inequality and the rise of poverty and widening gaps in income against Australia's extreme wealth. To examine the Australian dream today unearths deep problems of inequality. These include:

- The richest ten per cent of Australian families own approximately 45 per cent of the country's wealth. Income inequality leaves the lowest 60 per cent (mainly youth) on the bread line.¹

¹ Wade, M. 2020, 'The rich, the comfortable middle and the rest: Australia's wealth and income ladder revealed'. Accessed 7th November 2021, The Sydney Morning Herald 17th December 2020,

- The highest 1 per cent of Australian families earns as much in a fortnight as the lowest 5 per cent receives in a year.²

In one of the richest countries in the world, Australia is failing too many children. Compounding inequality is schooling disparity.

- Australian students are tumbling down global OECD rankings in reading and science.
- Today 1.2 million Australian children are growing up in poverty.
- All children imprisoned in the Northern Territory are Aboriginal.
- No improvement in closing school gaps for over a decade for Aboriginal children.³

There is now a large body of research that confirms the school challenges Aboriginal students face when settler identities are projected onto Aboriginal children without their consent.⁴ Aboriginal school experiences illuminate how Aboriginal children are blamed for their own failure leaving untouched normative notions of settler identities and histories in curriculum.

‘What is the place of the Child in Australian society? Specifically, how do we address school crisis in delivering education to the Aboriginal child?’

Australia is yet to live up to the promise of democracy for the Aboriginal learner. We need a new social contract for schooling that moves us beyond a single, one size fits all ‘Australian Dream’.

<https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/the-rich-the-comfortable-middle-and-the-rest-australia-s-wealth-and-income-ladder-revealed-20201216-p56nzl.html>

Sprague, J-A & Moore, T. 2018, ‘Australia is one of the world's wealthiest nations: Credit Suisse’. Accessed 7th November 2021, Financial Review 19th October 2018, <https://www.afr.com/companies/financial-services/australia-is-one-of-the-worlds-wealthiest-nations-credit-suisse-20181019-h16u1y>

² Davidson, P, Saunders, P, Bradbury, B & Wong, M. 2018, ‘Poverty in Australia 2018’. ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 2, Sydney: ACOSS.

³ Commonwealth of Australia. 2018, ‘Closing the Gap: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Prime Minister’s Report’. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet: Canberra, ACT.

⁴ Price, K. (ed.) 2012. ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education: An Introduction for the Teaching Profession’. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Education transforms lives. Schools do the work of the nation to help all children be happier, grow healthier, learn stronger and earn higher.

The future of our children is at risk and so is our humanity.

We are at a turning point.

Urgent action is needed to change course for better education futures.

Background

What an honour it is to be here and to present my work in this terrific series.

I want to thank Flinders and UniSA, Uncle Frank Wanganeen, Lynette Crocker, Professors Hughes-Warrington, Professor Irene Watson, Associate Professor Simone Ululka Tur and Amy Cleland. I acknowledge the unceded sovereignty of all Kaurna children and their land which we are on. I also pay tribute to the Duguid family members who are here tonight. The long legacy of Charles and Phyllis Duguid as Aboriginal rights campaigners questioned the poverty and degradation imposed upon the Pitjantjatjara people under colonial rule. In disputing what we now know as the *Australian Dream*, Charles was involved in the anti-slavery society, was a founding member of the Aborigines Protection Board and help found Ernabella Mission where he believe the Aboriginal child could be raised in their language and culture free of exploitation and assimilation.⁵

To advance this legacy, then please let me begin.

Following the insights from Paulo Freire a leading 20th Century Brazilian educator on education as practices of freedom from injustice, a dark cloud of school inequality has descended over Australia.

Let me open with a series of questions that highlight I believe, a gravitational pull of Australian politics toward education inequality.

⁵ Duguid, C. 1972, 'Doctor and the Aborigines'. Rigby, Australia.

- What is the meaning and purpose of schooling after colonial invasion and massacre?
- How do we explain Australia's identity crisis where teachers ignore the identity of the Aboriginal child as ancient knowledge producer?
- With the Aboriginal child excluded and not recognised in the birth certificate of the nation (the Australian constitution), what does this Australianness of state mean for school instruction of children?
- In other words what is the meaning of settler sovereignty in Australia when the Aboriginal child is not legally or officially recognised. Why is it left to teachers and curriculum to determine the Aboriginal place in history? In what I call a constitution - curriculum nexus, by which I mean, if Aboriginal children are not recognised in the Australia's constitution, they are marginalised in Australia's curriculum.
- How does Australia's yet to be determined place for the Aboriginal child regardless of debates around it - help schools decide whose knowledges languages and histories are included and whose are excluded?
- All children are intelligent. How then do we support teachers in dialogic culturally responsive instruction to see Aboriginal children as competent subjects as claimed by Freire? How do we teach teachers to link learning to Aboriginal cultural and linguistic talents brought from home to school for success?
- And lastly how does Australian neoliberal business model reforms of standards testing and the need for public school 'to make money' - inhibit pluralism that is inconsistent with its own democratic vision of a just society?

Now obviously answering all these questions deeply is a massive task.

Three of my recent papers used for this presentation only attempt to offer a partial answer to some of these questions. These papers include: *'Education after Australian*

Massacre, Australian Association for Research in Education,⁶ *Aboriginal child as knowledge producer*, Routledge Press, United Kingdom,⁷ and *Engaging Australian Early Childhood Teachers to connect Learning to the lifeworld's of Aboriginal Children*, Routledge Press, United Kingdom.⁸

Three Moves

In a more modest approach, I want to do three things briefly.

First I want to talk to what we know about the image of the Aboriginal learner as deficit and its widespread use in schools and why shifting to seeing the 'Aboriginal child as knowledge producer matters to academic success.

Second, I want to briefly talk about the consequences of the rise of nationalism and neoliberal standardised school reform. I want to examine these new forms of colonial inequalities resistant to cultural pluralism in what some education scholars call the 'undercutting of public faith in defining institutions of democracy'.

Thirdly I want talk about what we might do about it. Not only to assist teachers to respond better to Aboriginal disparities but by pivoting toward a culturally and linguistic responsive instruction.

So first, what have we learnt about deficit thinking toward the Aboriginal child in Australian schools?

It was 2017, in the academic journal 'Issues in Educational Research' that a paper appeared by Indigenous education researcher Lissa Buxton from Notre Dame University, Australia. Her paper titled 'Ditching deficit thinking: Changing to a culture

⁶ Rigney, L-I. 2020, 'Educating Aboriginal children after Massacre: Adorno in Australia and the culturally responsive movement'. Australian Association for Research in Education Seminar 7, 30th September 2020, Accessed 6th December, 2021 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Hk_axTFAvQ

⁷ Rigney, L-I. 2021, 'Aboriginal child as knowledge producer: bringing into dialogue Indigenist epistemologies and culturally responsive pedagogies for schooling', in Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies, Routledge, UK, pp. 578–590.

⁸ Rigney, L-I. 2022, Getting Beyond Marginalisation of Culturally Responsive Pedagogies: Engaging Australian Early Childhood Teachers to connect Learning to the lifeworld's of Aboriginal Children. In C. Brock, B. Exley & L-I Rigney (Eds.) 'Critical' Conversations: International Perspectives on Literacies, Diversities, and Opportunities for Learning. Routledge UK, In Press.

of high expectations' reported findings that deficit thinking of the Aboriginal child was persistent and widespread in schools, that its poor literacy and attendance metrics confirm its impact on school inequality, that it has a long and deep colonial legacy in education policy and that primary teachers including experienced teachers did not feel confident in meeting teacher standards in delivering Aboriginal Education.⁹ This research confirms findings by other researchers including by Sarra,¹⁰ Moodie,¹¹ and Lowe.¹²

So, what does deficit thinking of the Aboriginal learner look like?

- Aboriginal children framed as a problem to be fixed.
- Aboriginal children are silenced when their cultural and linguistic talents are unlinked to learning.
- Blaming the child for failure deflects away from teacher attitude, curriculum bias social inequality like poverty.
- Lack of success seen as an Aboriginal cultural trait that produces teacher low expectations.

The deficit view that Aboriginal languages and cultures are less than dominant English is an age-old debate. Many people make the point that English is the literacy language of the economy and that it should be the only medium of instruction, that Aboriginal languages, literacy and cultures have a negative consequence for the Aboriginal child learning English. The argument for settler grammar, English only literacy testing is winning.

⁹ Buxton, L. 2017, 'Ditching deficit thinking: Changing to a culture of high expectations'.

Issues in Educational Research, 27(2), 198-214

¹⁰ Sarra, C. 2011, 'Transforming Indigenous education'. In N. Purdie, G. Milgate & H. R. Bell (Eds.), Two-way teaching and learning: Towards culturally reflective and relevant education. Camberwell, Victoria: ACER Press.

¹¹ Moodie N; Vass G; Lowe K. 2021, 'Special issue editorial: systematic reviews in Indigenous education', Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, vol. 49, pp. 1 – 4.

¹² Lowe K; Burgess C. 2019, 'Aboriginal Voices: Social Justice and Transforming Aboriginal Education', in Freebody K; Goodwin S; Proctor H (ed.), Higher Education, Pedagogy and Social Justice, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 97 – 117.

On the other side, others argue students who have strong first language literacy skills are able to acquire the second language more easily due to language transfer.

Imagine if we could conduct an experiment. Imagine if overnight we could support teacher practices away from deficit approaches to place the prior experiences of Aboriginal children and their cultural and linguistic intelligence at the centre of teaching and learning. Imagine if we viewed Aboriginal children as intelligent and capable and that we see them as already being ancient knowledge producers for more than 40,000 years for their families and community.

What would happen? Would this increase or decrease teacher and student confidence with each other? Would this further diminish learning success?

Well Professor Rob Hattam and I conducted exactly this experiment in a prestigious Australian Research Council discovery three-year grant¹³ that used culturally responsive teacher practices in 10 multicultural schools with 20 teachers in multicultural schools servicing over 400 students.¹⁴

So what happened? The data is clear.

- Teachers' confidence increased in teaching Aboriginal children and curriculum increased.
- Greater student engagement and belonging emerged .
- A shift to hard fun and high intellectual challenge at the level and pace of the learner. In other words, a reduction in low expectations and seeing the child as weak and needy.
- Teacher image of the child shifted toward seeing the Aboriginal child as knowledge producer for both community and the school.

We were able to observe how culturally responsive pedagogies (teacher practices) has the potential to provide educators with capacities and confidence to design effective learning events that view the Aboriginal child as competent knowledge producer.¹⁵ This

¹³ Rigney, L.-I. and Hattam, R. 2016–2019, 'Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy'. (IN170100017), Project funded by the Australian Research Council.

Rigney, L.-I. & Hattam, R. 2018, 'Toward a decolonizing Australian culturally responsive pedagogy', American Educational Research Association Conference, 13–17 April. New York.

¹⁴ Rigney, L.-I, Sisson, J, Hattam, R, & Morrison, A. 2020, 'Bringing culturally responsive pedagogies and Reggio Emilia education principles into dialogue: Children learning to live together in diverse communities: Final report' 2020. Adelaide, SA: UniSA.

¹⁵ Morrison, A., Rigney, L.-I, Hattam, R., & Diplock, A. 2019, 'Toward an Australian Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: A narrative review of the literature'. Adelaide, SA: University of South Australia.

experiment helped us answer an intractable debate over decades. Can a predominantly Non-Aboriginal teacher workforce shift from deficit teaching and that the Aboriginal child's culture and linguistic repertoire when linked to curriculum can improve learning. It enabled us show how these teacher practices became driven by children's strengths rather than perceived deficits of them and their families.

Freire's work taught us the valuable lesson in what he called the 'banking' concept of education, where teachers must shift from seeing students as empty vessels with zero knowledge and the teacher's task is only to fill these vessels with settler only knowledge. In contrast our findings taught us when teachers and students we co-constructors of knowledge - more learning took place. While attendance and student outcomes were gradual and positive but not evenly spread an increase in disposition was clear.

Other findings showed when teachers researched their own practice through nuanced pedagogical documentation, they became more culturally confident. The take home message connecting curriculum strongly to the child's lifeworld's works. While many teachers are successful - others are struggling to promote a culturally responsive learning atmosphere and its architecture.

The third thing the experiment found was that while the corporatisation of public schools' and its neoliberal "audit culture of teaching" manifested through standardised literacy testing' did inhibit teacher practice for diversity - but with intentional reforms and inclusion in both the professional development of practising teacher- these did make a difference to teacher confidence.

We found that deliberate managing of the teacher's labour in favour of diversity while building the importance of professional learning communities in a school to teacher network – was found to be essential to enabling greater possibilities for culturally responsive practice to flourish.

In comparing elements that support the development of Culturally responsive practices with literature related to teachers' work intensification in a neoliberal context, it is clear that neoliberal policy regimes are deeply problematic for establishing teacher's professional wellbeing or addressing their complex pedagogical challenges.

Let me be clear, the policies of accountability, managerialism and performativity technologies such as English only settler grammar NAPLAN and non-compulsory Aboriginal curriculum have serious consequences for Aboriginal Education.

The take home message here is that competent child needs a competent teacher and that a culturally responsive teacher needs a culturally responsive professional development programme. One that values and take seriously the teachers pedagogical challenges in classroom and the school, and that the neo-liberal school is going to have to come to terms with if the ending the crisis in Aboriginal outcomes is the new Australian dream.

We must remember Schools counts in a democracy.

So finally, what should we be doing about it to overcome the crisis in school and teacher delivery of Aboriginal Education? In other what should we be doing to increase culturally responsive schooling, leadership and policy so Aboriginal children can achieve their version of an Australian dream.

If we were smart, we would invoke in schools, educators to learn the child's talents and multiple knowledges in order to link these to learning.

We need to invoke five provocations for teachers to consider as they engage in culturally responsive pedagogies.

- provide high intellectual challenge.
- strongly connect to children's life-worlds.
- ensure that all children feel positive about their own cultural identity.
- construct opportunities for children to share learning in meaningful ways within community through multimodal literacies.
- model and inspire an activist orientation to change the inequality in their communities.

The impact of these will cast a long shadow of teacher instructional improvement.

In Conclusion

Schools do count in a democracy to ensure the child citizenry rights are upheld.

Education inequality and disadvantage is against the child's rights.

We do not need to settle for this. It does not have to be this way.

We can support teachers to ensure their classroom practices are not disconnected from country, culture and linguistic talents of children.

Linking the world of home and school is the future.

We achieve Normalising classrooms where language and literacy are viewed as socially constructed and culturally specific.

The take home message to school teachers and parents in how to be authentically responsive to children:

- respond respectfully
- respond culturally
- respond democratically
- respond with stretch

A single Australian dream is not our future.

As was visioned by Charles Duguid - our future is multilingual, multicultural and multiliterate

Thank you

Dedication:

Dedicated to Joanne Katrina Rigney who taught me compassion, justice and caring.



Relevant Author Papers

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