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A response to 'Yes, DI did it'

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Abstract

The authors of the article 'Did DI do it? The impact of a programme designed to improve literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools' respond to a critique of their analysis of work.

Article Response

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The article '*Yes, DI did it: The impact of Direct Instruction on literacy outcomes for Very Remote Indigenous schools*' purports to refute the findings of our article entitled '*Did DI do it? The impact of a programme designed to improve literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools*' published as a peer reviewed article in the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

The analysis presented in 'Yes DI did it' uses a completely different methodology based on 'growth' measures and for different time periods so the article cannot be used to refute our claims that Direct Instruction used by schools within the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Programme, did not improve literacy outcomes.

The problem with 'growth' measures employed in the analysis is that they assume that the students tested in one year are the same students that are tested two years later. In remote schools this is highly unlikely because of the normal movement of students in and out of communities. Furthermore, comparisons using 'growth' data are really only useful when comparing similar starting points. Comparisons with other remote schools or all Australian schools, which are made in the article, are therefore meaningless. It is relatively easy to get quick growth with any intervention that targets low achieving students. We note the article's reference to Hattie's support for Direct Instruction's impact in terms of effect size. To suggest that the evidence for Direct Instruction is universal would be misleading. In analysis of Direct Instruction research, Eppley and Dudley-Marling (2019) report on their findings:

> *Overall, the results of DI research published between 2002 and 2012 are mixed at best. The strongest research finding on the efficacy of DI is, perhaps, small and temporary improvements in students' word-level skills. Small, temporary gains have been demonstrated on word level tests such as the DIBELS tests of oral reading fluency (ORF) and nonsense word fluency (NWF) subtests, as well as the Woodcock-Johnson 'word attack' subtest that also measures NWF. None of these three tests measure comprehension. Even this limited outcome of increased speed and decoding of nonsense words is questionable given the significant methodological problems that plague DI research. (p. 39)*

It is here that a reliance on growth data is risky. Growth in word-level skills gives no indication of improved comprehension, critical thinking or problem solving. The FLRPSP funding was premised on an assumption that literacy outcomes (based on school NAPLAN scores, and reflected in the 2017 and 2018 evaluation reports) in remote schools would improve. Our analysis, which this article has failed to refute, demonstrates that in the very remote schools we examined, Direct Instruction had no positive impact on literacy outcomes, based on Year 3 and Year 5 reading results. All the publicly available evaluations of DI programmes in Australian remote schools offer similar findings (ACER, 2013; Dawson *et al.*, 2017, 2018), so we are not alone in the critique we offer.

At its core, education is philosophical and context (including historical context) matters—the purpose for education within context is therefore fundamentally important for its value (Biesta, 2020). Good teachers and pedagogies that are responsive to the context and lifeworld of the child matter (Zipin, 2017; Morrison *et al.*, 2019). Current Closing the Gap measures embody low and narrow expectations and the approaches that have been resourced by the Commonwealth government to achieve these minimal outcomes have not worked. Pearson powerfully argues that distinct and unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, voices and aspirations maintain a rightful place in shaping the nation (Pearson, 2014). So, when it comes to education, why are these elements to be left outside the school gates?

The rejoinder article dismisses Red Dirt thinking as being about low expectations and an ideological stance belonging to the past. It then goes on to lay blame on 'Indigenous parents and communities in remote areas' for failed policies. The colonising logic here removes the agency, the voices and self-determination of people in remote communities. The argument

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against a contextualised response based on the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities, stands in stark contrast to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Education Council, 2019) which argues that:

> *The education community need to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, their families and communities in all aspects of education… This engagement needs to be based on the principles of shared decision-making, place-based responses and regional decision-making, evidence, evaluation and accountability, targeted investment, and integrated systems. (p. 16)*

Far from being 'flawed thinking of thirty or forty years ago', as suggested by the article, Red Dirt thinking offers a contemporary and contextualised response to the question of what education is for in remote communities. The research brings together the voices and aspirations of more than 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants through lectures, conference presentations, interviews, focus groups, presentations and more. Their contribution is powerfully represented in many articles that emerged from the research (e.g. Lester *et al.*, 2013; Burton and Osborne, 2014; Minutjukur *et al.*, 2014; Minutjukur and Osborne, 2014; Tjitayi and Osborne, 2014). Our argument is that aspiring to English language literacy offered by Direct Instruction is not enough. Respondents in the Red Dirt research wanted their children to be able to think critically for themselves, to maintain their Aboriginal identity and language and be able to engage fully with English and all that global citizenship has to offer. If we, as researchers, sought to silence the voices of remote Aboriginal families, educators and communities in negating arguments that local languages, aspirations and identities should also be strengthened through education, it would be dishonest and amount to a shameful, unethical form of betrayal. The problem for the rejoinder authors when they argue that 'Evidence of efficacy should trump ideological discourse in educational policy' is that independent, rigorous research has to date failed to show evidence of efficacy of Direct Instruction in remote schools.

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John Guenther is a researcher with 20 years' experience working in overlapping fields of social inquiry, typically in areas related to education and training, and its intersections with mental health and wellbeing, justice, employment, child protection and welfare. In the last 10 years he has more intentionally focussed on issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote parts of Australia. He led the Remote Education Systems project under the CRC for Remote Economic Participation (2011–2016) and is currently the Research Leader for Education and Training with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, based in Darwin, Northern Territory. John is a leading academic in the field of remote education and has published widely on his findings, often under the banner of 'Red Dirt Thinking'.

Samuel Osborne is the Associate Director, Regional Engagement (APY Lands) at UniSA. He has worked in Aboriginal Education since 1995 in roles including teaching language, remote school principal and research. He currently coordinates Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara language programmes at UniSA and has a research role in a range of projects including Culturally Responsive Pedagogies, Water Literacies and Pedagogies for Justice. A focus of his work is to privilege Aboriginal languages, knowledges and voices in research relating to Aboriginal education. He worked on the Remote Education Systems project within the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) from 2011 to 2015.

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